

The New Criterion

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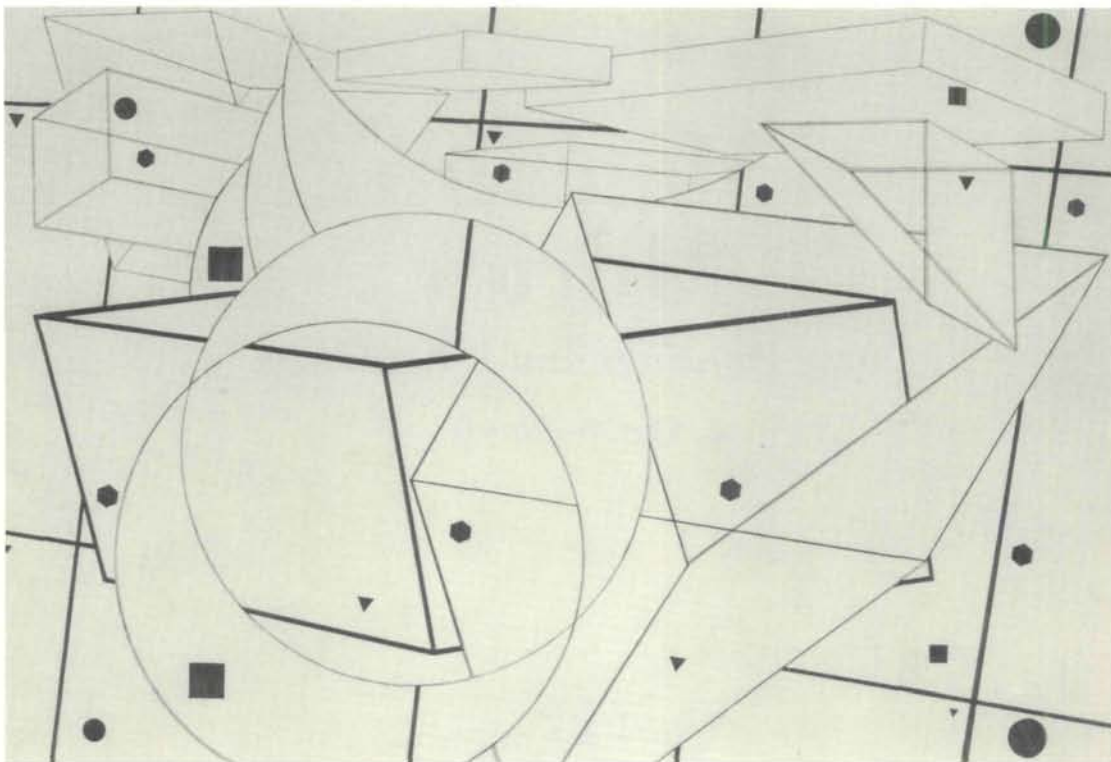
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GEORGE SEGAL

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Professor Howe's prescriptions

by Hilton Kramer

On the evening of Friday, January 27, Irving Howe—Distinguished Professor of English at the City University of New York—was the principal speaker at a symposium on the theme of “Excellence: Theory and Practice in the Humanities.” The sponsor of this noteworthy event was the New York Council for the Humanities, and its setting was the New York Public Library. As befits an occasion so replete with the trappings of what Professor Howe himself described as “established power,” his pronouncements on the present condition of American cultural life were promptly reported in the press. Two days after his speech at the library, *The New York Times* published an account of the symposium under a four-column headline which read: “Some Intellectuals See Conservatism as a Dark Cloud.”

According to this account, which was written by Walter Goodman, “Professor Howe said that ‘excellence’ was being used as a code word for ‘educational Reaganism.’” He was therefore against it. “The very word ‘excellence,’” Professor Howe declared in what Mr. Goodman called a “tart observation,” “ought to make us cringe a little, so thoroughly has it been assimilated to the prose style of commission reports, letters of recommendation and hair spray commercials.” Mr. Goodman then gave his readers an example of the more delicate and nuanced prose style favored by Professor Howe in his own discussion of the problem of excellence in the humanities to-

day. “He attacked proposals to increase discipline in the schools, toughen testing of pupils and set up a system of merit pay for teachers,” Mr. Goodman wrote, “as ‘wrong, stupid, reactionary,’ as well as ‘anti-humanistic’”—which, whatever else might be said about it, is definitely not the prose style of hair spray commercials.

But this initial *Times* report, though lavish in its sympathetic attention to Professor Howe’s message, proved insufficient for so important an occasion. And so two weeks later, on February 14, Miss Charlotte Curtis, the *Times*’s resident expert on the current doings of the rich and the famous, devoted her entire column to a suitably admiring interview with the Distinguished Professor, thus allowing him to expand on the political implications of his speech before the New York Council for the Humanities. Alas, this is the way it usually is with the representatives of established power. When they choose to speak out on the topics of the day, there is never any lack of volunteers ready to assist them in spreading the word. Not surprisingly in this case, *The New Republic* quickly offered its services by publishing the official text of Professor Howe’s remarks—or at least a discreetly edited version of them—in its issue of March 5.

Clearly, this speech *was* an event of some sort, for while it is not unusual for speeches on current topics to be delivered by the Distinguished Professors of English at the City University—the other well-known occupant

of that professorship is, of course, Alfred Kazin—it is rare for these occasions to be so promptly and so prominently reported in the press. We must assume, therefore, that it was the official sponsorship of the occasion as well as the unusual note of alarm repeatedly sounded in the speech itself that won it so much attention. After all, when prominent members of the cultural establishment speak with alarm, the world can be expected to listen.

What exactly was it, then, that Professor Howe—whom Miss Curtis described as “a towering literary critic” and “a thinker”—found so alarming in the present condition of American culture? Had he discovered some special characteristic in the new novels or new poems or new works of literary criticism he was reading that so disturbed him that he felt compelled to speak out boldly against them, lest their dread influence lead to a decline in literary standards? No, as a matter of fact, on this occasion the “towering literary critic” had nothing to say about new writers or their books. Was it, perhaps, the new paintings he had been seeing, or the new buildings he saw going up, or the new music he had been listening to? Professor Howe, as we know, is a man of many interests—I believe he once wrote an essay on the ballet, for example. But in his address to the New York Council for the Humanities he was silent not only about new writing but about the present condition of the arts as well—and even the beloved ballet somehow failed to receive any mention. (It might have been interesting to have had Professor Howe’s reflections on what role, if any, the concept of excellence plays in this particular discipline.) Was it, then, some terrible crisis in the world of literary scholarship that had moved him to speak out? That, of course, would have been a fitting topic for an address to the New York Council for the Humanities meeting in the hallowed sanctuary of the New York Public Library. But no, the present state of literary scholarship was not the Distinguished Professor’s concern on this occasion.

All this was very odd. For midway through

his speech, Professor Howe focused particular attention on what he called “a tense engagement with the culture of one’s time,” and he seemed to believe that this was not only a good thing in itself, but indeed the very thing that was essential to the proper defense of standards.

Standards are best defended [he observed] not simply by declaring oneself a partisan of Dante, Racine, and Shakespeare, but by a tense engagement with the culture of one’s time, in all its unavoidable flaws and confusions. Standards are not ordained from on high by lords of tradition. Standards are not external to our lived experience. Standards are not fixed yardsticks with which we may briskly grade new works of art and literature. The critic isn’t a truant officer calling the errant children of culture back to class. No; standards derive from our encounters with new works of art and literature, encounters that must always be troubled and provisional even as they rest upon earlier encounters with the art and literature of the past which, we like to think, we now understand.

Now there was certainly something here worth pondering. New works of art and literature very often *are* crucial to the creation of any standards vital enough to win our allegiance. But the question of precisely what the relation might be between this unexceptionable point and the rest of Professor Howe’s speech—that was something of a conundrum. For when it came to those precious “encounters with new works of art and literature,” there was simply not a trace of them anywhere in the Distinguished Professor’s text. One wondered if Professor Howe thought it would be considered “reactionary,” or even “anti-humanistic,” to be more specific.

True, following his own prescription, he carefully avoided declaring himself a partisan of Dante, Racine, and Shakespeare. But this, as it turned out, was only because he was far more interested in declaring himself a partisan of Emerson and Whitman—and this declaration, while not without interest,

did not really bring us very much closer to the new works of art and literature which Professor Howe had led us to suppose were absolutely central to his subject.

In the speech before the New York Council for the Humanities, precisely because it lacked all reference to concrete particulars, contemporary culture—the condition of which was Professor Howe's ostensible subject—was made to assume a shadowy, disembodied, faceless existence. The cultural life of our time emerged from this discussion as a phenomenon without names or examples or identifiable landmarks. Even its alleged enemies, whose views evidently induced in Professor Howe such intense feelings of fear and indignation, were utterly nameless: a vague, featureless, malevolent force identified simply as “they.” The truth is, of course, that the whole notion of contemporary culture in Professor Howe's speech amounted to little more than an ideological abstraction, and a rather familiar one at that—it was all a matter, as he never tired of insisting, of “the struggle of classes, ethnic groups, literary schools, and popular audiences”—and remained stubbornly unattached to a single living artist or writer or critic.

This reference, by the way, to “the struggle of classes”—what was it but a rhetorical variation, no doubt deemed suitably modified for addressing the New York Council for the Humanities, on the hoary old concept of class struggle? And this, in turn, served to remind us that the entire concept of culture in Professor Howe's speech was drawn from the dusty prop room of Marxian melodrama. In the role traditionally reserved for the proletariat in that melodrama, Professor Howe cast a variety of characters—“shirt-sleeved barbarians,” as he called one group, who he claimed were being denied their cultural rights by “a narrow-spirited cultural exclusiveness” that was said to be brandishing the weapons of “excellence” and “standards” as instruments of oppression; or, in another instance, what he called “minority subcultures: blacks, women, gays,” who were likewise alleged to be

suffering from the oppressive “distaste” of some powerful but unnamed malefactors.

Exactly who those “shirt-sleeved barbarians” might be was by no means made clear, either, in Professor Howe's address. I certainly hope the Distinguished Professor was not referring to “blacks, women, gays” in using this unlovely appellation, or indeed to the “million Hispanic people” in New York City about whom he asked, in yet another rhetorical flourish, “What do we know about their thoughts, their feelings, their culture? How long can we remain ignorant of their grievances and aspirations?” But if these were not the people he had in mind in speaking of “shirt-sleeved barbarians,” then of whom precisely *was* he thinking? As for the enemies of these culturally oppressed people, their identity remained a secret as well. The closest Professor Howe could bring himself to naming names was to name, of all people, Gilbert Osmond, a character in a novel by Henry James!

There was, I am afraid, a great deal of bad faith in all this ideological posturing. You can search through the entire bibliography of Professor Howe's copious critical writings since the 1940s—four decades of unremitting labor, much of it devoted to American literature—and you will find that neither the work of “blacks, women, gays” nor that of the “million Hispanic people” in New York City has ever before loomed as much of an issue for him. There was, to be sure, that memorable episode in which the Distinguished Professor offered some instruction to Ralph Ellison on the proper conduct of his literary imagination, but the less said about that debacle the better. The truth is, Professor Howe's appeal on behalf of the cultural aspirations of so-called “shirt-sleeved barbarians” is rather like his perennial call for socialism—it is a prescription for others to follow, not one that he has ever lived by himself. Moreover, he knows very well that there has never been a time in the entire history of American cultural life when its institutions and its opportunities were as programmatically *open* to the aspirations of “subcultures” of every type and variety as they

are today. The hypocrisy involved in pretending *not* to know is really appalling.

Yet it was necessary for the purposes of Professor Howe's speech that he keep up the pretense of believing that ours is a closed culture—and that the concept of "excellence" is somehow responsible for keeping it closed. "Toward an Open Culture" was what he called his talk when it was published in *The New Republic*, and in its closing strophes he offered his audience a list of prescriptions for ensuring that American cultural life would, as he put it, open itself "once more upon democratic vistas." Foremost among these prescriptions was the following: "I would propose a rule of thumb," Professor Howe declared, "criticize whichever outlook is dominant at the moment, whether in the sphere of cultural opinion or public decision. No one has ever gone very wrong by jabbing at established power." He then went on to say that "Today, in our cultural experience, the conservative outlook seems dominant or at least increasingly powerful."

Now this ascription of power to the conservative outlook is an interesting assertion—it is, in fact, the key to Professor Howe's entire diatribe—and one would naturally be curious to know on the basis of what recent developments it was being made. Though Professor Howe was careful not to raise the question, it may be worth asking what, after all, the indices of "established power" in the cultural world might be. Prizes, preferments, appointments? Access to the media, and influence over major cultural institutions? The books that are consistently praised in the press, and the critics assigned to review them? If we are to judge by such criteria as these, it is indeed illuminating to discover just where the "established power" in the cultural world is currently to be found.

We might start with the English Department at the City University of New York, where the two most celebrated Distinguished Professors are, of course, Irving Howe and Alfred Kazin. If we look uptown, to the activities of the American Academy and

Institute of Arts and Letters, we find that John Kenneth Galbraith has just succeeded Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., as president, and that among new members elected to the Institute in 1983 and 1984 are David Levine, William S. Burroughs, Richard Howard, Russell Baker, and E. L. Doctorow. Somehow I find it difficult to believe that any of these well-known figures truly represent "the conservative outlook."

Let us turn, then, to the world of literary prizes. Since 1982, the National Book Critics Circle Awards in criticism have gone to Virgil Thomson, Gore Vidal, and John Updike (who also got the fiction award in 1982). The general nonfiction awards have gone to Stephen Jay Gould, Robert Caro, and Seymour Hersh. Again, I find it hard to believe that any of these writers can be said to represent "the conservative outlook." As for the Pulitzer Prizes, let us recall that in 1983 the fiction award went to Alice Walker, the award in autobiography to Russell Baker, and the award in drama to Marsha Norman—not, surely, supporters of conservative causes.

The truth is, it would be easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a serious conservative writer to win a major literary prize in this country today—or, for that matter, for a conservative scholar to be invited to give one of the Schweitzer Lectures in the Humanities at New York University or one of the Trilling Seminars at Columbia or, for that matter, an address to the New York Council for the Humanities—and Professor Howe knows this, too. So what does it mean for him to declare that "Today, in our cultural experience, the conservative outlook seems dominant or at least increasingly powerful"? It means that Professor Howe finds it increasingly difficult to tolerate *any* critical challenge to the Left-liberal pieties that have long dominated the American cultural establishment and continue to dominate it today. What his alarm signifies, however, is his awareness that such a challenge is now alive and well—in, among other quarters, *The New Criterion*—and that it is meeting with increasing favor

because it has something fresh and vital to say about precisely those "new works of art and literature" which Professor Howe could not even bring himself to name in his address to the New York Council for the Humanities.

It is not, finally, on behalf of an "open" culture in this country that Professor Howe is offering his prescriptions so vehemently, but for a *closed* culture—a culture closed to every idea that questions the entrenched clichés of the Left-liberal mind. Charlotte Curtis called the Distinguished Professor of English at the City University "the dissenting critic," but this was surely a misnomer.

For in his address to the New York Council for the Humanities, what Professor Howe was actually calling for was a *resistance* to dissent. It was a spectacle not lacking its element of comedy, to be sure—the representative of the established power wrapping himself in the tattered mantle of rebellion, and calling for a "cultural revolution" indistinguishable from the status quo. But beyond the comedy and hypocrisy of it, we should not overlook the fact that Professor Howe's address was, in its very refusal to debate the issues and ideas that prompted it, itself deeply hostile to the very tenets of an open democratic culture.

The emergence of MoCA: a new museum for Los Angeles

by Christopher Knight

The first thing that must be said about "The First Show"¹ is simply that it happened. For the inaugural exhibition of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles accomplished two significant feats, beside which most any critical complaints grow pale: First, it brought together more postwar art worth looking at than has been seen in Los Angeles since the launching of the Marshall Plan; and second, it brought to a resounding end the museum's interminable gestation period, a protracted incubation that lasted nearly four years. To consider "The First Show" as one might any large exhibition presents certain difficulties, however, since this particular gathering of paintings, sculptures, and installations is not a rigorous examination of a particular body of work. Rather, it is the temporary mounting of a hypothetical permanent collection for a museum, drawn solely from the holdings of private collectors. The exhibition and its accompanying catalogue wholeheartedly seek to champion a cause identified and embraced

by MoCA: The subject of "The First Show" is the wisdom and the efficacy of art collecting, both for private individuals and for public institutions. As a new museum largely without a collection of its own,² and as a highly visible institution in a city not noted for the vibrant depth and breadth of private collections of contemporary art, MoCA has assumed for its debut an unabashedly propagandistic role. It has been said that art museums are the great churches of the twentieth century and, in a manner not unlike Pope Gregory XV's founding of the *Congregatio de propaganda fide* in the seventeenth century, this museum has forthrightly established jurisdiction over a missionary territory.

"We do not consider it our job to force contemporary art in one direction or another through propaganda or patronage," curator James Thrall Soby said of New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1944. MoCA, on the other hand, has aggressively adopted both approaches. Prior to the opening of "The First Show," the museum unveiled its first major event, a performance called "Available Light," which was commissioned for the occasion from choreographer Lucinda Childs, composer John Adams, architect Frank O. Gehry, and others. In its first two

1 "The First Show: Painting and Sculpture from Eight Collections, 1940-1980" was organized by Pontus Hulten, founding director; Richard Koshalek, director; and Julia Brown, senior curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. It was shown at the museum's interim facility, The Temporary Contemporary, from November 20, 1983, through February 19. The catalogue, available at the Museum's offices at 414 Boyd Street in Los Angeles, costs \$30.

2 This will change soon. On February 29 it was announced that MoCA had just bought eighty works of Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art from Count and Countess Giuseppe Panza di Biumo of Milan.

outings, then, MoCA has put “propaganda and patronage” at the forefront of its agenda. The question that lingers is whether such an agenda does indeed “force” (to use Soby’s word) or at least restrict contemporary art, thus contributing to the manufacture of an academic culture. Certainly it does (it always has), but the prospects are neither as sinister nor even as programmatic as they are often supposed to be. For the radically altered relationships between art and the larger social order that have come about, often tumultuously, during the last forty years have primarily conspired to alter drastically the scale of the proceedings.

Consider the Museum of Modern Art’s own birthright on that fateful afternoon in May 1929, when the idea for such an institution was presented to A. Conger Goodyear at a tea party hosted by Lizzie P. Bliss, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, and Mary Quinn Sullivan. A scant five months later MoMA opened in temporary quarters with an unknown young man named Alfred Barr at the helm and an exhibition of four of the founding fathers of art in this century—Cézanne, Gauguin, Seurat, and van Gogh—happily installed in its galleries. Crucial to these rapidly unfolding events, however, was the condition of relative public indifference within which avant-garde art then existed. Certainly MoMA’s inaugural exhibition attracted thousands (as did subsequent endeavors), but modern art was still very much an aberration in the minds of most Americans. When it did come into their line of vision, it was open to charges ranging from charlatanism to advancing a Communist plot. More often it was simply ignored. Even a landmark show such as the 1932 “Modern Architecture: International Exhibition”—which ushered in the International Style and played a pivotal role in changing the face of built-America—was among the most poorly attended offerings of the young institution.

Of MoMA’s “first show,” Henry McBride wrote in the columns of *The New York Sun*: “This enterprise, so long and so devoutly wished, is so large in its promises and so positive in its present attainments, that it

seems to have come full-blown upon us over night. It truly makes us rub our eyes now that we have gone such a journey to see that we have arrived at the destination. And the exhibition is so incontestably serious and so impressively alive that the astonishment will now be general that so many fences had been erected to keep this art from the public.” Quite the same sentiments could be applied to the debut of the Museum of Contemporary Art, yet this infant has been born into a very different world. No longer is it unheard of, or even uncommon, for an artist in the current or recent vanguard to be widely venerated. Legions of observers now stand poised to pounce on whatever the latest trend might be, or even to invent one. Federal, state, and local agencies are convinced to a greater degree than ever before of the efficacy of offering aid to art and artists, while galleries and museums are now widely seen as effective tools in the social and economic rehabilitation of cities (as witnessed by MoCA’s own birthright as a linchpin within the urban redevelopment plan for downtown Los Angeles). The list of such relatively recent developments is long, and one is tempted to wonder when the public will begin to *demand* that some fences be built in order to keep the onrushing flood of art away. Be that as it may, if the Museum of Modern Art came into being despite the public’s general indifference, the Museum of Contemporary Art has come into being precisely for the satisfaction of public hankerings. For this reason, it is incontestably true that, had MoMA’s inaugural been a resounding flop, it would have been unfortunate but hardly calamitous. Had MoCA’s failed, the wreckage would still be spewing smoke and flames.

In the fallout of the explosion known as the 1960s, typified by the appearance of an art called Pop, culture of all kinds began to be transformed into a raucous spectator sport. Whether the burgeoning audience engages in critical examination or in stupefied genuflection does not alter the fact that artists today experiment, evolve, fail, and succeed under the vigilant eye of a curious

and growing public. The dizzying rise of this spectator-audience has fostered a new form of criticism that is indistinguishable from publicity. It has led to vigorous denunciations of playing to the crowd and to dithering charges of crass commercialism. It has witnessed the creation of some exceptional art while sweeping away the possibility of there even being an avant-garde. Not least of all, the instant insertion of new art into the roaring mainstream has sounded the death knell of modernism. For an ineluctable feature of what it means to be postmodern is to stand in the glare of the spotlight at center stage.

Los Angeles has a certain affinity for spotlights: It is no accident that the first buds of art's efflorescence shot forth there in the 1960s, nor that four of the city's five significant museums have been built since 1965. As the single institution to concern itself solely with postwar art—the very art which in many ways chronicles these radical alterations—MoCA has thus arrived at a moment of critical mass. In the cold heat of the spotlight, the performer just making its debut in “The First Show” has been experimenting, evolving, failing, and succeeding under the vigilant eye of the public since its moment of conception nearly four years ago.

Spotlights distort. They flatten features and drain color from whatever falls within the scope of their blinding light. Like much art of the past few years, MoCA has responded to this situation not through a refusal to accept its existence but through aggressive posturing, hyperopia, and excessive coloration. Since the idea for a new museum was first broached in 1979, its progress has seemed at times like an archly stylized outtake from *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*: Pontus Hulten was suddenly named director of the museum-idea and just as suddenly resigned the post; architect Arata Isozaki unveiled a model for the museum's permanent building, to be completed in 1986, then confided to a reporter that he was terribly distressed by the very plan he had just presented; financing collapsed for the one-billion-dollar redevelopment project that would provide

MoCA with the land and the resources with which to build, then was rescued from the breach as a sequence of more modest “phases” that would begin with the new museum; just as the squabbles over the architectural plan appeared to have been resolved, the trustee chairing the building committee quit in disapproval. As these and other scenes flashed by, the steady spotlight continued to shine, casting every success or failure, however grand or insignificant, into excessively stylized patterns of high slapstick or low melodrama. Perhaps the most bizarre aspect of watching MoCA's extended and convoluted gestation was simply that no museum existed. There was stationery adorned with the museum's name, an office identified by a sign on the door, a telephone number listed in the directory, legal contracts and pledges, periodic press conferences, a growing and changing staff and board of trustees—but there was no museum. It seemed, at times, like the apotheosis of conceptual art.

“The First Show” happened on November 20, 1983, and with it, MoCA happened too. The coming together of the omnipresent spotlight (complete with the added weight of a mysterious persona created over the course of nearly four years' time) and of an actual exhibition of often exceptional art was startling. While drawn from eight private collections in Europe and the United States³ (including some of the most distinguished holdings to be found anywhere), the exhibition is installed in a loosely chronological fashion in the manner of most permanent public collections. As a result, the exhibition fosters the odd sense that the Museum of Contemporary Art has long been a prominent feature of the Los Angeles landscape: It radiates instant venerability.

To be sure, this effect is illusory. But it is

3 Selections for the exhibition were drawn from the collections of Dominique di Menil, Howard and Jean Lipman, Drs. Peter and Irene Ludwig, Giuseppe and Giovanna Panza di Biumo, Robert A. Rowan, Charles and Doris Saatchi, Taft and Rita Schreiber, and the Weisman family.

not inopportune for the inaugural exhibition of a young institution whose brief life has followed a rocky path in a city whose flirtations with the art of our time have, on the whole, rarely led to fruitful consummation. "The First Show: Painting and Sculpture from Eight Collections, 1940-1980" consists of one hundred forty-nine paintings, sculptures, and installations, most by American and European artists who range from old masters (Willem de Kooning, Piet Mondrian, Jackson Pollock) to young blood (David Amico, Mike Kelley, Julian Schnabel). The chronology of "isms" represented leads from Neo-Plasticism to Neo-Expressionism, while the alphabetical listing begins with Josef Albers and ends with Wols (Alfred Otto Wolfgang Schulze). Nowhere else can one see several installations (of varying quality) by Los Angeles artists associated with the phenomenological genre awkwardly known as "light-and-space." The Pop art selections constitute a thumbnail anthology of the movement, while the intermingling of Abstract Expressionist paintings from several collections is generally excellent, particularly since Pollock, de Kooning, Mark Rothko, and Clyfford Still are each represented by more than one fine example. Certainly, a very long list could be made of very good artists whose work won't be found in this survey. (Most remarkable, given the locale of the museum, is that Ed Ruscha is unrepresented.) One also might assume that Picasso had died in 1939 on the evidence of this exhibition, devoted as it is to chronicling "the new." The installation, alas, is frequently unsatisfactory, despite Frank Gehry's spectacularly beautiful renovation of the two warehouses that serve as MoCA's temporary facility. (The fifty-thousand-square-foot museum is industrially elegant, with a steel-trussed ceiling of redwood decking, wire-glass skylights, a south-facing clerestory, and an outdoor gallery of steel I-beams topped with chain-link fencing and spanning an asphalt cul-de-sac.) In the most egregious case, Richard Serra's massive steel wall, *Strike* (1969-71), is installed in a newly built room whose walls are much too low.

If there is a larger drawback to the show, it is to be found in the attempt to do too much. Most notably, the two tiers to the exhibition—one an examination of collecting by private individuals, the other of institutional collecting—are awkwardly laid one atop the other. The roughly chronological installation serves to obscure the sense of the eight collections as discrete entities. As a result, one is faced with an incomplete survey of the last forty years and without a clear sense of the individual motives and sensibilities of the collectors. It's not difficult to discern why this path was chosen. For the attempt to do too much is simply a feature of that elaborate confluence of factors that is bringing the museum into being, while doubling as a response to the broad and variegated audience it wishes to attract. "The First Show" must sell itself—and MoCA, too—to a host of constituencies, and what sells is what is most comfortably accessible and pleasantly familiar. At bottom, "The First Show" seeks to drive home a simple and uncomplicated message: collecting art is good.

As recently as a decade ago, one could have pointed to any number of artists who would not only have taken issue with that statement, but who actively devoted considerable energies to making art that might, in some way, challenge the very concept. The weakest element in MoCA's advancement of this simple message is its unwillingness to engage in a critical examination and dissection of the thorny relationships between postwar art and the marketplace. The catalogue essays by curator Julia Brown, by founding director Pontus Hulten, and by art historian Susan C. Larsen are largely paeans to the enterprise; the remaining interviews with the eight collectors are often interesting but hardly challenging. (When Howard Lipman provocatively declares, "Everybody for whom I have no respect likes to be known as a collector," the unidentified interviewer merely asks him to suggest another title.) Nor are there ruminations on behalf of the museum as a collecting institution and of the artist as "collectee." In assuming

what amounts to a social issue as the subject for its debut, the museum has quite clearly begun with a definitive answer and then worked backward to fill in the docket. Along the way, strange things occur. For instance, at least a half dozen paintings are encased in Plexiglas boxes. As in the case of Barnett Newman's *Onement VI* (1953), the box utterly obscures the picture. Having no painting at which to look, one begins to consider the Plexiglas box: It signifies the need for protection, the necessity that the art be protected from *you*. Not being able to see the painting also transfers attention to the label on the wall and to its pairing of the name of a celebrated artist with that of the picture's celebrated owner. Armed with this information (it's conveniently provided in English, Spanish, and Japanese) and faced with the reflective surface of the Plexiglas box, the subject of *Onement VI* becomes the audience's visible proximity to fame, to wealth, and to received greatness.

That sense of proximity, of course, is the fundamental resource on which museums have traditionally drawn in order to bring themselves from the far territory of an idea into the domain of actuality. It fueled the Museum of Modern Art in 1929, and it is fueling the Museum of Contemporary Art today. MoCA may have endured extreme gyrations during its four-year evolution, but they have merely been part and parcel of those which now characterize the larger world. "The First Show," like MoMA's inaugural exhibition fifty-four years earlier, is a safe show. Yet before the idea of a museum devoted to the art of our time had become a common fixture of our cultural life, MoMA had to invent itself by embracing the founding fathers of art in this century. Now that such institutions have assumed a position of prominence at center stage, MoCA has had to be set in motion by embracing the very foundation on which rests the modern idea of a museum itself.

Growing up with old records

by Samuel Lipman

As is the case with most child prodigies, my early musical experience was rich but frightfully narrow. Insofar as I was aware of musical greatness at all, I knew only what could come through the activities of my own childish fingers, modeling themselves as best they might on my piano teacher's own strengths and weaknesses. Music was for me the piano, and *my* piano to boot. I don't think I had heard a live symphony orchestra before I played a concerto with one, at the age of eleven. I did not see an opera until I was well into adolescence. Even the concerts of great touring artists were off limits to me, not just because of my parents' straitened circumstances but also because of the feeling that a *Wunderkind's* job is himself to play, not to listen to others. Indeed, I missed an opportunity to hear Rachmaninoff in a solo recital in 1942 shortly before his death because my teacher felt I shouldn't lose the practice time.

Whatever the gains achieved in that attribute the Germans call *Fingerfertigkeit* (digital dexterity), the effect of the total preoccupation with self on the prodigy's later life is profound and often devastating. Few child stars go on to become adult celebrities, and even for these golden few the rewards of highly successful maturity pale by comparison with the memory of having once been an infant savior. For the many who don't succeed, the contrast between past fame and present ignominy can be literally life-threatening. It was, I suppose, curiosity that helped

save me. Some of my curiosity was intellectual and led me at least partially away from music. A greater part was musical and caused me to become deeply interested in music as a whole as I was growing ever more aware of the piano's effects on my existence. This musical curiosity I owe to the phonograph.

Unlike today's children—and perhaps unlike many children of almost a half-century ago—I did not discover the phonograph until I was already in my early teens. It was, I seem to remember, in early 1947 that my father arranged to have an old Philco radio altered so that a record player could be plugged into it. The record player itself was a clumsy, unreliable, and hum-ridden mess that required a new steel needle for each record. Having bought the necessary equipment, my father didn't seem to have any money left with which to buy records. Strange as it is for us to realize now, in this era of fifty-minute records costing as little as three or four dollars, in 1947 *eight* minutes of music cost a very real dollar (or more); and in the case of multi-record sets, the album that held the records cost an additional dollar. My father, fortunately, had saved some acoustic discs, divided between Caruso and Jewish cantorials, from the flush 1920s, but they sounded terrible. By the time I was through playing (and replaying) them, they were even more worn out than when I had started.

My own record collecting began shortly thereafter when I was given (as an honorar-

ium for playing a few piano pieces at a charity benefit) Arthur Rubinstein's performance of the Rachmaninoff Second Piano Concerto, which had just been issued. I reveled in the beautiful tunes and in a performance that seemed to me then (and still seems to me today) noble and exciting. Somehow I got a very few dollars together and managed to buy my first albums. The first, of the Bach Concerto in D minor, played by Eugene Istomin and the Busch Chamber Players, I chose because I was learning the work myself; the second, of the Bach Concerto for Two Violins, played by Yehudi Menuhin and Georges Enescu with Pierre Monteux conducting, I chose because I had little more than a year before I made my own orchestral debut with Monteux. I loved these performances, and I still think I was right to love them. The Menuhin-Enescu-Monteux Concerto for Two Violins, recorded in Paris in 1932, is still treasured as one of the classics of the phonograph.

I continued, too, on my Rachmaninoff binge. At my cousin's prompting (she, convalescing with us after an operation, brought over a fancy English Garrard portable machine and some of her own records), I listened to Rachmaninoff himself playing his own Fourth Concerto. Before long I managed to acquire recordings not only of this work but also of the First Concerto and the Paganini Rhapsody, both in his own marvelous performances with the Philadelphia Orchestra, the First Concerto under Ormandy and the Rhapsody under Stokowski. At this time also I heard some records away from my own home; my teacher sent me to a commercial record library. For a nickel, one could hear a single four-minute 78 RPM side. I was there to study, as it were, the competition. My teacher assigned me to listen to Artur Schnabel's Beethoven Sonata opus 110 so that I could hear whether Schnabel was showing me up. I needn't say here by how much he was in fact doing just that, but I wasn't bright enough to know it at the time. This incident did, however, make a major impression on me, even if not for Schnabel's playing. It was the first time I

had been in the glorious presence of the label, complete with the famous image of the famous dog, of the Red Label Celebrity Records of His Master's Voice in England. However little I knew of music, I instantly comprehended that here, in gold and brown on a red background, was class. Despite everything that has happened in recording technology since then, this epiphany still informs my record collecting.

I didn't think too much about records for the next two years. I was too busy learning the ways of a new piano teacher, playing tennis, and going to high school. When I graduated in 1950, I decided that I would stay out of college until I was the usual age (eighteen) for going. That gave me two years with much more time to pursue performances that were all the more beautiful to me for my not having to accomplish them. Because the record business was in the midst of changing over from 78 RPM shellac discs to the 33-1/3 RPM vinyl LPs, outmoded discs were wonderfully available. Merchants knew the 78s were finished, and the rush to unload inventory was in full swing. Domestic records—RCA Victor and Columbia—were being priced at a discount, and my distantly worshipped HMVs were going for a song. Even the record library where I had rejected Schnabel was selling its stock at bargain rates. I bought several Egon Petri recordings of Beethoven and Brahms, the marvelous Toscanini Beethoven Fifth Symphony of 1939, and the great Budapest Quartet recording of the Beethoven String Quintet opus 29 with Milton Katims as the extra violist. While I did have a personal reason for choosing the Petri records—my new piano teacher was Petri's disciple—I had no such connection with the Toscanini and Budapest records. My choice was a sign, late but welcome, that I was beginning to find my own way.

This way was greatly affected by a set of experiences outside either piano playing or recordings. Now, at sixteen, I finally saw some operas. The first of these was *Aida*, with no less than Renata Tebaldi and Mario del Monaco as the leads. Alas, I wasn't

moved a bit, and Verdi since that Sunday afternoon in the War Memorial Opera House in San Francisco has remained an object of respect rather than love. Then as now, my love was to be reserved for Richard Wagner, whose *Tristan und Isolde* and *Parsifal* I saw a month later.

My reasons for asking my mother to get the Wagner tickets are now a bit murky, but two reasons for my fastening on Wagner—an unlikely choice in a Jewish and Zionist household—remain in my mind, and they both involved records. First, during a long bout with scarlet fever in 1944, I had heard (on an all-night “good music” radio program) the now classic Melchior-Flagstad recording, made with the San Francisco Opera Orchestra in 1939, of the Act II duet from *Tristan*. The glory of the singing—and of the music—never left my thoughts. And second, just before it came time to get tickets for the 1950 opera season, I read my parents’ old *Victrola Book of the Opera*. For some reason, I was taken with the high drama of Wagner’s operas, at least as they were described in that book.

The impact of *Tristan* was simply devastating. The Prelude to Act I, the duet of my earlier blessed memory, and the concluding “Liebestod” were music of a yearning and intensity that I could barely fathom. *Parsifal* struck me just as powerfully. I was, of course, supremely fortunate in my first Wagnerian experiences: the *Isolde* and *Kundry* I heard were both sung by the immortal Kirsten Flagstad, then at the height of her second career.

My enthusiasm for Wagner was not welcomed by my piano teacher, who favored Beethoven and Mozart and who, as a refugee from Hitler, had other reasons for hating the music. Nevertheless, I immediately went to my neighborhood record store to find out more about this new and powerful music. My new, gimcrack \$9.95 Columbia record player was useless, because there was as yet no extended late Wagner available on LP. So I was forced back to the outmoded 78s, where I soon discovered my own Nibelung’s treasure.

I was selective about my hunting. I immediately

rejected the various acoustic records I was offered. The sound of these primitive discs is familiar to anyone who has heard the voice of Caruso coming as if out of a long drainpipe and being accompanied by what seems to be a swarm of buzzing and rattling insects. The original process, dating back to the invention of recording in 1876, was far from capturing anything more than the faintest hint of a singer’s true amplitude or of an orchestra’s color and force. I wanted the music whole, and that I could only get on records made after the introduction of electrical recording in 1925.

It was my luck that the few years from 1925 to the outbreak of World War II constituted what is now recognized as the golden age of Wagner performance. This age was thoroughly documented on records because of the perception of one man and the commitment of one company: Fred Gaisberg and HMV (later to become the giant Electrical and Musical Industries Ltd.).¹ Through licensing agreements with RCA Victor in the United States, much of the best of HMV in Europe (including that of its subsidiary company, Electrola, in Germany) was quickly made available here. It was on those familiar old Victor Red Seal discs that I first heard this great music done the way it still seems to me it ought to be done.

My first discovery was the Hungarian bass-baritone, Friedrich Schorr, whom I heard in several excerpts from Act III of *Die Meistersinger*. Here was Schorr in perhaps his greatest role, that of the wise cobbler Hans Sachs. The noble *Wahnmonolog*, where Sachs expatiates on human folly; the first trial of Walther’s *Preislied*, sung to Sachs’s warm approval; Sachs’s christening of the song, so suggestive of the rich tradition of Protestant hymns—all these excerpts were touchingly sung by Schorr in a large, warm, and rock-solid voice. But the best excerpt was on the last record, the stupendous quintet in which

1 For a discussion of the contributions of Gaisberg and EMI to recording in this period, see my article, “Getting on the Record,” in *The New Criterion*, January, 1983.

the now happy Eva, the triumphant Walther, and the resigned Sachs are joined by the newly engaged apprentice David and his Magdalena, each bringing forward a separate mood. In my short life only Flagstad had prepared me for the singing represented here by Schorr's Sachs, Lauritz Melchior's Walther, and Elisabeth Schumann's Eva.

I started out playing my new acquisitions with the noisy steel needles that I had been using from the beginning of my record playing. I soon realized that these blunt instruments were drowning out the music in scratch and hiss. I knew that really good machines used light pick-ups with sapphire and even—imagine!—*diamond* needles called by the fancy name of *styli*. But my phonograph didn't take such modern appliances, and in any case I preferred to spend my limited funds on music, not hardware. I remembered that my cousin had used exotic cactus thorns in place of steel needles: they cut down on surface noise (and also on whatever high frequencies early electrical recording had managed to capture) and did less damage to the shellac record grooves. Cactus thorns, like so much else about records and the equipment to play them, had a cult appeal; each *Feinschmecker* swore by a different type and brand. But for me what was important was that they were quiet and cheap. They cost about thirty-five cents for a package of twelve, and when re-pointed on their own inexpensive rotating sharpener each could be used (or so I remember) to play perhaps two dozen sides. I haven't heard a record played with a cactus needle in more than thirty years, but the autumnal quality of the sound they provided lingers in my mind. Sometimes I think that my visceral dislike of new developments in recording technology, which seem to stress the high frequencies, comes from my attempt to recapture the world of my own beloved thorns.

By now—roughly the end of 1950—I had a generous sponsor, who had undertaken to support my musical education. So I had a little more money to spend. I bought everything I could of Schorr and Melchior. Schu-

mann, alas, had recorded nothing else of Wagner. Naturally I wasn't satisfied with mere excerpts. I craved extended passages and even whole acts, and soon found out that these joys did in fact exist. Some of the larger undertakings—among them, the almost complete Bayreuth recordings (dating from 1930) of *Tannhäuser* and *Tristan*—were no longer available. The 1935 recording of Act I of *Die Walküre* with Melchior, Lotte Lehmann, and Bruno Walter, though hard to get on the original 78s, was slated to appear on LP as one of the first revivals in RCA's *Treasury of Immortal Performances*. Many of the more than two dozen records HMV had done in the late 1920s of *Siegfried* were still available only on 78s. These used Schorr and Melchior, and also such remarkable character singers as Albert Reiss and Heinrich Tessmer for the tenor role of Siegfried's *soi-disant* father, Mime.

On these discs, in the recordings of a single opera or even passage, could be found different singers in the same role, different conductors, and different orchestras. Thus an extended set of excerpts from *Die Walküre*, made in 1926 and 1927, used the London Symphony Orchestra (led by Albert Coates), the Berlin State Opera Orchestra (led by Leo Blech), and an unidentified "Symphony Orchestra" (led by Lawrence Collingwood). There was, too, more than one singer for three of the five major parts: while only Walter Widdop sang Siegmund and Howard Fry did Hunding, Fry doubled Friedrich Schorr as Wotan, Frida Leider and Florence Austral shared Brünnhilde, and Göta Ljungberg and Louise Trenton shared Sieglinde. A slightly later sixteen-disc recording of *Götterdämmerung* followed the same procedure. This concoction had, in addition to Austral as Brünnhilde, two Siegfrieds (Widdop and Rudolf Laubenthal), three Hagens (Ivar Andréßen, Emanuel List, and Frederic Collier), two orchestras (the London Symphony Orchestra and the Berlin State Opera Orchestra), and three conductors (Blech, Coates, and Collingwood). Commercial considerations doubtless caused these particular cast changes, but political

factors were at the root of the last example of this kind of recording, the complete Act II of *Die Walküre* in Vienna and Berlin in 1935. It used Lehmann, Melchior, List, Ella Flesch, and Alfred Jerger, and Bruno Walter and the Vienna Philharmonic. As their more acceptable counterparts—more acceptable, that is, to Hitler—it used Marta Fuchs, Hans Hotter, and the Berlin State Opera Orchestra under Bruno Seidler-Winkler. All this changing around offended purists then, as it does now. What is remarkable is just how high a level of singing, characterization, orchestral playing, and leadership comes across to the listener through all these changes.

Though I managed to lay my hands on many of these records, I couldn't get them all, even when I was willing to pay premium prices for such choice items as Leider's "Liebestod," Schorr's singing of the finale from *Die Meistersinger*, and the Schorr-Elisabeth Rethberg performance of the Sachs-Eva passage from Act III of the same opera. Because I was then taking lessons with my piano teacher and with composer Darius Milhaud at Mills College, I was able to make copies of some rare discs in the college library. Among these discs was a complete set of the ten records Electrola recorded in 1928 from a live performance of *Die Meistersinger* (with Schorr as Sachs) by the Berlin State Opera, commemorating the hundred fifteenth anniversary of Wagner's birth.

In the summer of 1951, I came east for the first time, to study with Pierre Monteux in Maine. On my way back to the west coast I stopped in at the temple of record collecting in America, the old Gramophone Shop on East Forty-eighth Street just off Fifth Avenue. The store was small, cluttered with shelves from floor to ceiling, and presided over by a staff who knew everything. Indeed, the Gramophone Shop even initiated a few classic recordings. Around 1935, its owner, Joe Brogan, had interested Gaisberg (and HMV) in recording Debussy songs with Maggie Teyte and Alfred Cortot. Slightly later the store underwrote several HMV ten-inch records, with Elena Gerhardt and

Gerald Moore, of Brahms, Schubert, and Wolf songs, which it sold under its own name. Even more important for collectors were the store's publishing ventures: in 1936 it published the invaluable first edition of *The Gramophone Shop Encyclopedia of Recorded Music*, edited by R. D. Darrell. Second and third editions followed in 1942 and 1948. On this first visit I bought the first edition of that book, and more than sixty 78s as well. For those who are worried about how I got all this home, I took the train.

I continued to buy 78s, filling out my Wagner collection with such beautiful records as the Columbia recordings of *Parsifal* made at Bayreuth in 1927 and the extraordinary *Lieder* discs made throughout the 1930s in Germany and England. Now, too, I started to buy a few LPs of those German artists whose singing of Wagner had come to maturity just before and during the war. Chief among these recordings were the complete *Meistersinger* and *Parsifal* from live performances at the first postwar Bayreuth Festival in 1951. *Die Meistersinger* was conducted by Herbert von Karajan and *Parsifal* by Hans Knappertsbusch. Despite many felicities in these recordings—among them, Erich Kunz's Beckmesser in *Meistersinger* and Knappertsbusch's long-lined conducting in *Parsifal*—I still preferred my old, clumsy 78s. The performances on them had *personality*. The LPs sounded to me then—and still sound today—emotionally flat.

In London, while on a trip to Europe in 1952, I found in an old bookstore a few extraordinary 78s. My great catch was the almost complete Act III of *Parsifal* conducted in 1928 by the legendary Karl Muck with the Berlin State Opera Orchestra and featuring some marvelous (though not terribly well-known) soloists. This recording, on eight Black Label HMV discs, marked the last of my major purchases of 78s. From that time on, I bought only LPs, and played them on increasingly better equipment. I began to lose my compulsive interest in Wagner, and even the complete Furtwängler-Flagstad *Tristan*, recorded in London in June of 1952, didn't revive my old passion.

Of course, I have retained a strong professional interest in the music and its performance, and I have even felt a certain critical interest in Wagner's ideas and their influence. What is gone is my youthful absorption in what Thomas Mann saw as Wagner's magic, a magic (for me) composed of a sensuality that only youth can think of lasting forever. A chapter in my life closed when I abandoned these old records, and it cannot be re-lived.

Several recent record releases have caused me to look again at this part of my growing up. EMI in England has in recent years devoted much effort to ransacking its glorious backlist for the treasures it contains. Cleanly and satisfyingly transferred, first to tape and then to LP, these old records, dating back to the beginning of the century, provide musical pleasure of a high order. They also serve as a welcome counterargument to the chorus of Pollyannish boosterism which tells us that institutional musical performance is getting better and better with each new injection of marketing and fundraising techniques. Perhaps the most interesting, as well as the most widely discussed, of these new re-issues have been concerned with the voice. Two substantial productions, the first and second volumes of *The Record of Singing*,² are largely concerned with operatic singing from 1899 to 1925; two large albums concerned with *Lieder* document the singing over the first half of the century of Schubert,³ and of

Schumann and Brahms.⁴ Special mention must be made of an extraordinary single LP of songs recorded in 1907 and 1911 by Elena Gerhardt, with the great conductor Arthur Nikisch at the piano.⁵ Something of how record collecting has changed from what it was in my salad days may be gathered from a simple set of statistics: the forty-three LPs I have just mentioned take up about six inches of shelf space, and cost about three hundred dollars; the originals of which they are transfers number around eight hundred 78 RPM sides, take up four feet of shelf space, and cost over a thousand dollars in, as they say, real money.

But for me, the most interesting of all the new re-releases is a seven-record set that was first issued in England and then, in an American pressing with less flossy packaging, here.⁶ *Wagner on Record 1926-1942* offers just the kind of records I collected and loved. What is more, they are marvelously transferred, substantially improving the sound of the originals. Here is Schorr as the Dutchman, as Sachs, as Wotan, and even as Gunther in *Götterdämmerung*. Here is Melchior as Tannhäuser and Lohengrin, as Siegmund and Siegfried, as Tristan, Walther, and Parsifal. Here is Leider as Isolde, Brünnhilde, and Kundry. Other famous singers appear in assorted roles. Among these stars are sopranos Lotte Lehmann, Tiana Lemnitz, and Elisabeth Rethberg, tenor Helge Rosvaenge, baritone Herbert Janssen, and bass Emanuel List. There are wonderful orchestras, from Bayreuth and Berlin to Vienna and London, and also many distinguished conductors, among them Furtwängler and Muck, Bruno Walter, and Sir Thomas Beecham.

2 Volume I of *The Record of Singing*, accompanied by Michael Scott's book of the same title, was sold out almost immediately upon its publication in 1977. The twelve LPs of the original package have now been divided into two parts of six records each under the title *A Record of Singing* (EMI HMV RLS 7705 and 77060). The book is available separately, as is a supplementary LP (EMI HMV HLM 7264) composed of 78s overlooked the first time around. This re-publication of the original LPs contains improved transfers of several of the old 78s. The thirteen LPs of the original issue of Volume II are still available (EMI HMV RLS 743).

3 The eight LPs of *Schubert Lieder on Record 1898-1952* are available as EMI HMV RLS 766.

4 The eight LPs of *Schumann and Brahms Lieder on Record 1901-1952* are available as EMI HMV RLS 1547003, from International Books and Records (40-11 Twenty-fourth Street, Long Island City, NY 11101).

5 EMI HMV HLM 1436031, also available from International Books and Records.

6 Seraphim IG-6130.

There are many magnificent performances on this set of seven LPs. The star performances are generally widely known, not just to collectors of 78s but to those recent record listeners who have had access to the frequent (and richly earned) LP re-issues. Leider, Melchior, Schorr, and the rest impress the listener for their powerful voices, and for the focused tones they invariably produced, no matter what the demands the musical line or dramatic pressures made on them. To compare these more than half-century-old performances with even the best of today's Wagnerian singing is to appreciate keenly the slough these operas have fallen into. Hildegard Behrens's highly touted performance of Isolde at the Metropolitan Opera this season pales beside Leider's traversal of the role, which is incomparably better and more steadily sung, and of another order altogether. Compared to Leider's performance, the Brünnhilde of Gwyneth Jones, another celebrated *Heldensopran* of the present, sounds on the Boulez Bayreuth *Ring* like a tattered flag waving in the breeze. Leider's superiority to the present crop of sopranos is not just a matter of vocalism, but also of her ability to explicate the text simply, without the crooning and mooning now so stylish amongst our so-called intelligent singers. What is true with Leider is doubly true with Melchior: there are no Wagner tenors today who can match him. And Schorr, whether as Sachs or as Wotan, sets an unreachable standard for today's baritones, especially in the penetration of character.

All of this comes as no surprise. What is something of a surprise is just how marvelously well the less well-known singers on these LPs sing. Vocally and artistically, Florence Austral, Florence Easton, and Walter Widdop come very close to their vastly more famous colleagues. Two performances in particular by these English-speaking artists (Austral took her stage name from her native Australia, and Easton and Widdop were born in England) stand at the summit of Wagner singing. Easton is represented here by the records she made with Melchior in

1932 of the closing scene from *Siegfried*, Austral and Widdop by the duet from the Prologue to *Götterdämmerung*. What these three voices (and Melchior's too, of course) have to offer is exuberant strength. Again, this comes as a revelation, and makes clear that what is missing in operatic performance today is a whole way of producing the voice.

The Austral-Widdop excerpt from *Götterdämmerung* is also praiseworthy for the incandescent conducting of the English-born Albert Coates. This pupil of Nikisch in Leipzig, perhaps best known to American record buyers as the conductor for Vladimir Horowitz on the 1930 HMV recording of the Rachmaninoff Third Concerto, never had a great international career, though he was known as an important conductor of Wagner and of Russian music. An associate of Fred Gaisberg, Coates made many Wagner records in the years immediately following 1925. On the evidence of these few *Götterdämmerung* records, Coates must have been one of the most exciting conductors of the century.

Another excerpt on these records, this time the *Preislied* segment from Act III of *Die Meistersinger* in a live performance at Covent Garden in 1936, is remarkable for the quality of the singing and for the orchestral leadership. The German tenor Torsten Ralf, who was Walther in Karl Böhm's solid and musicianly 1938 Dresden performance of Act III (another of my old prized 78 sets), sings here in a cast graced by the gentle-voiced Lemnitz. Beecham is the conductor. Though Ralf was not a great success when he sang at the Met after 1945, in the Covent Garden performance he seems the Walther of one's dreams, and Lemnitz's singing of Eva's few notes at the end of the excerpt is of a purity and weightlessness difficult to describe but easy to be deeply moved by. As strong as these two performances are, the most powerful impression is made by Beecham's forceful conducting, which manages such perfect ensemble between orchestra and singer that one feels that only here can a listener learn the true meaning of playing *together*.

So exceptional is just about everything contained in *Wagner on Record* that it may seem churlish to point out how this set nevertheless fails to give a proper historical picture of Wagner performance in Europe and England during this period or of the riches contained in the HMV archives. It is not possible here to do more than mention a few of the missed opportunities; I shall limit myself to some comments on *Tristan*, *Die Meistersinger*, the *Ring*, and *Parsifal*.

To begin with *Tristan*: There is no documentation in this set of the abridged Act III made about 1927 with Widdop as Tristan and the excellent Swedish soprano Göta Ljungberg as Isolde. That most of the conducting on these five 78s was done by Coates and Leo Blech suggests that these records are of great interest. I have not heard this particular set, but I have heard another set which surely belongs in a historically accurate compilation. HMV, in 1936, recorded an entire live performance of *Tristan* at Covent Garden, conducted by Fritz Reiner, with Flagstad as Isolde and Melchior as Tristan. Due to Melchior's objections—he felt that his voice wasn't recorded strongly enough—the fifty twelve-inch 78s were never released. They have been available on pirate LP transfers, although poorly processed from the originals and equally poorly pressed.⁷ Even in this condition, one can hear a magnificent performance by Flagstad and a close to magnificent one by Melchior; the conducting of Reiner is stupendous. While there may still be legal barriers to using Melchior's contribution, no such barriers could have prohibited excerpting from the Covent Garden performance of the forgotten contralto Sabine Kalter, who gloriously sings Brangäne's *Einsam wachend in der Nacht* from Act II.

I have heard two other excerpts from *Tristan* that deserved inclusion in *Wagner on Record*. In place of Furtwängler's 1938 recording of the Prelude, which is easily available (even in the United States), the very

beautifully played performance by Wagner's son Siegfried, made in 1926 with the Berlin State Opera Orchestra, would have better served the historical record.⁸ Room should have been made, too, for the little-known rendition of Tristan's reply to King Marke in Act II made in 1930 by the inimitable Irish tenor John McCormack for his own amusement. Issued on a budget LP collection by RCA fifteen years ago,⁹ this excerpt demonstrates the advantages of treating profoundly reflective material in Wagner not as opera but as a *Lied*. Whatever the shortcomings of McCormack's German accent, they are more than compensated for by his immensely touching comprehension of the text, and by his strict musicality.

In the case of *Die Meistersinger*, among the significant omissions are the excerpts from the 1928 live recording in Berlin that I had so coveted at Mills College. One of these excerpts, Pogner's Address from Act I, is sung by the great bass Emanuel List (the Hunding of the complete 1935 Lehmann-Melchior-Walter *Walküre* Act I). List never recorded this material commercially. In addition to lengthy sections of Act II involving both Sachs and Beckmesser, there are on these 78 discs extended excerpts, featuring Schorr at his most wise, of the scene in Act III in which Sachs tutors Walther on the *Preislied* and the following section in which Sachs gently rejects Eva's offer of marriage. Though these discs have been available on the pirate market in LP transfer,¹⁰ the 78 originals used for the purpose were evidently in poor condition, and the resulting LPs are badly distorted. More is lost here than some musically interesting material. These excerpts from *Die Meistersinger* constitute what is so far as I know the only extant recording of a live and staged Wagner performance by the Berlin State Opera in the (musically) halcyon 1920s.

8 Available in an LP transfer some years ago as EMI Electrola 147-30 647/8.

9 RCA Victrola VIC-1472.

10 The Golden Age of Opera, EJS 548A/C.

7 My copy is on a well-known "private" label, The Golden Age of Opera: EJS 465A/H.

Another omission from the *Meistersinger* excerpts in *Wagner on Record* is the exceptionally good-sounding and marvelously sung recording made by Schorr and Elisabeth Rethberg, of the Sachs-Eva scene in Act III. This was issued in the early 1930s,¹¹ and has never been released (to my knowledge) in an LP transfer. The reason may be, as in the case of the McCormack excerpt, a problem of rights. But this hardly seems an insuperable obstacle; in many of its recent historical compilations, HMV has used records made by other companies. No such problem, however, could have caused the leaving out of the English tenor Tudor Davies's fresh and vibrant "Prize Song" (sung in English).¹² This welcome testimony to the healthy state of singing in England in the 1920s is an important part of getting the musical story right.

Wagner on Record omits three important recordings of excerpts from *Die Walküre*. First, there is much wonderful material in the 1926-7 Austral-Widdop-Schorr set,¹³ unused here. Second, there are the two discs of the confrontation between Wotan and Fricka in Act II, made by Schorr with the rich-voiced contralto Emmi Leisner, accompanied by the London Symphony Orchestra and John Barbirolli.¹⁴ Third, there are the Berlin sections of the 1935 complete *Walküre*, Act II.¹⁵ These last present a young and steadier-voiced Hans Hotter in the role of Wotan. *Wagner on Record*, by ignoring Hotter, compounds the error made by Vox/Turnabout when it released an LP transfer

of the Vienna segments of the original 78s.¹⁶

Siegfried was the opera of the *Ring* that received the most complete phonographic treatment in the years just after 1925. There were three separate Victor albums of these Berlin-London-Vienna performances consisting of some twenty discs; the English series totaled twenty-one discs. By 1929, Melchior had replaced the once favorite Rudolf Laubenthal as the tenor of choice for the title role, so some of these discs were duplicates of earlier efforts. Given the profusion of albums and companies of issue, the exact picture of what had been done and what was available was rather murky. This confusion lasted until the appearance of three effortful pages in the *Gramophone Shop Encyclopedia* of 1936 explaining the situation. By the time I started to collect records, many of these 78 discs were either impossible to get or only available (used) at a premium. Less than half the original material is present in *Wagner on Record*. Some of the rest, including a marvelous performance of the Act I Forging Song by Laubenthal¹⁷ and an irreplaceable version of the question-and-answer session between Alberich and the Wanderer, as sung by Eduard Habich and Schorr,¹⁸ is available on excellent LP transfers. Much of the remainder, including the final duet sung by Leider and Laubenthal in a truncated version, seems unobtainable on LP anywhere.

The presence in *Wagner on Record* of the stupendous Austral-Widdop duet from the Prologue to *Götterdämmerung* can only serve to whet the appetite for more of this late-1920s HMV set. Unfortunately, of the remaining thirty sides, only one is vouchsafed us on the present transfer: the final four minutes of orchestral music (conducted by Coates), which is used to fill out what was unrecorded in the 1928 Leider version of the Immolation Scene. Austral's performance of this scene, of which the Coates orchestral ending was an integral part, has vanished without a trace. (Laubenthal's af-

11 My copy is HMV DB 1421; it was also issued in the United States as RCA Victor 7681.

12 My copy is on a Blue Label RCA Victor disc, 55288. The original issue was HMV D1021.

13 My copy was RCA Victor DM 26/7; in England the number was HMV GM 47.

14 These discs have been transferred to LP on Preiser (Austria) LV 125. This record also has material from Act II of the 1926/27 *Walküre*.

15 My copy, bought in the early 1950s, is on RCA Victor DM 582; the discs were issued in England as HMV GM 336.

16 Vox/Turnabout THS 65163.

17 Preiser (Austria) LV 213.

18 Preiser (Austria) LV 125.

fecting performance of Siegfried's Narration and Death is, happily, available on a fine LP transfer.¹⁹ Even on its own terms, *Wagner on Record* fails to deliver. It includes only one-third of the three 78 RPM sides Melchior made of the Narration and Death. In this case, the material is available on an LP transfer.²⁰

There is also wonderful material from *Parsifal*, the rights to which have been owned for a half-century by EMI, which did not find its way into *Wagner on Record*. I have mentioned Muck's almost complete 1928 recording of Act III. This transcendental performance is almost complete on an LP re-issue,²¹ but unfortunately it leaves out the anguished performance of the Act III Prelude.²² *Wagner on Record* does not fill this gap, nor does it give us Muck's earlier recording, again with the Berlin State Opera Orchestra, of the Prelude to Act I.²³

There is another, and more serious, short-coming in *Wagner on Record*'s coverage of *Parsifal*, limited as it is to Leider's Act II *Ich sah das Kind*. In 1927, English Columbia (which merged after 1931 with HMV into EMI) recorded fifteen 78 RPM sides of *Parsifal* at the Bayreuth Festival, ten of them with Muck conducting and the remaining five with Siegfried Wagner. A tantalizing bit of Act I—the beginning of the Grail Scene—was available, magically conducted by Muck on a Bayreuth Festival Centennial LP.²⁴ The Good Friday Scene, divinely sung by Alexander Kipnis with the sensitive collaboration of Siegfried Wagner, was available in the 1970s on an American LP re-issue.²⁵ A recent Electrola release, *100 Jahre Parsifal*, does bring almost all these 1927

Bayreuth discs to LPs.²⁶ They constitute essential material for an understanding both of *Parsifal* and of the tradition of its performance. Their absence from *Wagner on Record* cannot but mislead newcomers to this music.

So just as was the case with CBS's massive and expensive Stravinsky one-hundredth birthday package two years ago,²⁷ a great record company—in this case EMI—has failed to give us a satisfactory conspectus of the available historical material. The failure of the Stravinsky set was due to an attempt on the part of the final guardians of the composer's reputation to impose their own ideas on Stravinsky's reputation and on the course of his career. The reasons for EMI's failure seem both less calculated and less mean-spirited, but they deserve discussion nonetheless.

The first reason concerns the strangely ambivalent attitude with which Keith Hardwick, the producer of *Wagner on Record*, seems to have approached his task. In an introductory note, Hardwick writes:

This album owes its genesis to a lunch-time discussion at EMI's Abbey Road Studios on the desirability of having a "potted" *Ring* on record. I must confess that I am not a "perfect Wagnerite" (in Shaw's famous phrase). Profoundly admiring his staggering industry, the magnificent breadth of his musical canvas, his mastery of orchestration and the acuity of his characterisation, I still find many of his operas excessively long (Act 3 of *Die Meistersinger* is longer than the whole of Verdi's *Rigoletto*), his versification often merely doggerel, and many of his scenes boringly repetitive.

All this having been said, Wagner's mature works contain many pages of intense beauty, power, and musical interest. It is fortunate that the arrival of electrical recording in 1925 (and

19 Preiser (Austria) LV 213.

20 Seraphim 1B-6086.

21 Preiser (Austria) LV 100.

22 My copy is on HMV D 1537; it is just now available in a cassette transfer on In Sync 4136.

23 My copy is RCA Victor 6861/2; the English issue was HMV D 1400/1. It is available in a cassette transfer on In Sync 4133.

24 EMI Electrola 1C 049 30 679.

25 Seraphim 60124.

26 EMI Electrola 1C 137-78174/75, also available from International Books and Records.

27 For a discussion of the CBS Stravinsky album, see my article, "Stravinsky: Re-recording History," in *The New Criterion*, October, 1982.

hence of something approaching fidelity) coincided with a "golden age" of Wagnerian singing: this album, issued as part of EMI's commemoration of the centenary of his death, contains some of the records made between the wars by the greatest of these singers.

No one can deny Hardwick the credit he deserves for his remarkable technical achievements here (and in so many other EMI re-issues as well): he has made these old records sonically attractive. But his lack of enthusiasm for Wagner's music may have had some effect on the quality of the project.

Hardwick's approach to his task is a reversion to two unhappy theories of musical art: great compositions are made up of great moments, and great opera is the result of great voices singing great tunes. But it was Wagner's later works that, by treating opera as the field for a music constantly evolving from the beginning of the work to the end, destroyed the intellectual legitimacy of "hit arias" and encored crowdpleasers. Whatever the audience for Verdi and Puccini may want, the audience for Wagner is dedicated to whole musical achievement, not just to highlights. To present Wagner's music as a succession of thrillingly sung melodic climaxes is at best to render it trivial, and at worst to betray its very existence.

What was required from EMI in this instance was some thoroughgoing attempt to

give us a feeling for more than just a golden age of singers performing beloved moments of art. What was needed was the use of the great resources of EMI's backlist to tell us what the level of performance of the mature works of Wagner was like at a critical moment for opera performance and for the evolution of German culture, of which Wagner-worship was such an important part.

EMI could have done this by making available the extended excerpts it recorded of *Tristan*, *Die Meistersinger*, the *Ring*, and *Parsifal* in the same form (transferred, it goes without saying, to LP) in which they were originally presented to the public. The duplications, differences in recording locations, changes in artists, and variations in performance levels, far from being offensive, would have provided both the lover of music and the lover of history with invaluable material on which to base an understanding of what was going on in the opera houses of Europe after World War I.

Because recordings, once made, are relatively permanent, EMI's opportunity remains. True to their own glorious history, EMI should return to the idea behind *Wagner on Record* and let us hear in an easily available form just what treasures are in their hoard. More is involved here than my old addiction to record collecting; what is at stake is the preservation in our memories of a splendid moment in music.

“The battle it was born to lose”: the poetry of Geoffrey Hill

by Robert Richman

The life of an honest man must be a perpetual infidelity. For the man who wishes to remain faithful to truth must make himself continually unfaithful to all the continual, successive, indefatigable renascent errors. And the man who wishes to remain faithful to justice must make himself continually unfaithful to inexhaustibly triumphant injustices.

—Charles Péguy, in *Bar-Cochebas*

The tongue's atrocities.

—Geoffrey Hill, in “History as Poetry”

When a major new work appears by one of the best poets now writing it is reason enough to command our attention. But when the work marks a significant departure in the poet's career, it is cause for our most careful scrutiny. When Geoffrey Hill's long poem, *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy*,¹ was published in Britain last year, it was immediately apparent to readers familiar with Hill's career that the poet was, at the age of fifty, striking out in a new direction. For thirty years, Hill had written poems whose central characteristic was a deep unease with the whole idea of writing

poetry. Indeed, so fiercely had Hill's work questioned itself that at times it often seemed as if he would cease writing altogether. With the publication of *Tenebrae*, in 1978, Hill's hand was so palsied by a near-nihilistic despair that his career seemed expended. But with *Péguy*, he has burst forth with one hundred quatrains of expansive, and in some ways vigorous, homage. *Péguy* is a moving rebellion against Hill's own previous work, the product of a very different kind of obsession. If we have learned anything from this poet's brilliant and fastidious career, it is that we should not underestimate the intelligence behind his every gesture. What is it about the French poet and patriot Charles Péguy (1873-1914) that kept one of our great contemporary poets from falling silent?

To get at the answer to this question, and thus at a proper sense of the question's importance, we must first examine the curious history of Geoffrey Hill's career. The task of understanding his difficult poetry is alleviated somewhat by the small amount one has to contend with. In thirty years of writing, only four thin volumes have appeared prior to *Péguy*: *For the Unfallen* (1959), *King Log* (1968), *Mercian Hymns* (1971), and *Tenebrae* (1978). *Péguy* is Hill's longest sequence to date.

Whether Hill has written about the difficult attraction of love, the paradox of a God unknowable but known, or the gruesome spectacle of history (holocausts and holo-

1 *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy*, by Geoffrey Hill. Agenda Editions/André Deutsch, 31 pp., £3. The poem was also published, in its entirety, in *The Paris Review*, Summer, 1983.

caust victims play a large part in his work), the poetry has always been grim, clipped, infrequent. On top of this, Hill's subjects are often played out against the inability of poetry to do justice to the experience it wishes to relate. Indeed, Hill's moral sensibility has been so anguished by the effrontery of writing about profound spiritual and physical pain that he has seemed to reject what he saw as poetry's often indulgent beauty. If Wordsworth, in high Romantic fashion, could confidently feel that "Over his own sweet voice the stock-dove broods," Hill has felt compelled to give the opposite view. In many of the early poems, "the Word," as he calls it, is castigated outright. In other poems he dramatizes the gap between poetry and experience by foiling our expectations of how a poem should read. Yet other, later, poems diminish to the point of threatening their own extinction. Either they grow impenetrably opaque or they simply disintegrate. The scarcely articulated bursts of energy and choked cries of grief in *Tenebrae* are Hill's most extreme examples of feeling and experience swallowing up their expression on the page.

Whether Hill's despair has manifested itself in strict, formal sonnets or in the shrinking black holes of the later poetry, all his poems, to some degree, are "Consumed with that which they were nourished by." Shakespeare was referring to the way the passions that feed life eventually conspire in its demise, but the paradox also applies to Hill's poetry: the experience that brings the poem to life sets up a standard the poem cannot do justice to. Indeed, the denial of fulfillment is a theme central to Hill's work.

All this would seem to be a surefire recipe for poetic nihilism. Unfortunately, for many poets—often American—who have pursued similar ideas, it is. We observe in their work a tendency toward loose forms, aggressively subjective eruptions, and the kind of ironic reversal that descends into a bland disparaging of the whole idea of poetry. Hill's achievement—and it has been one of the most substantial in contemporary English poetry—has been to create, out of this quasi-

nihilistic obsession, true works of poetry: profound, deeply crafted, and eloquent. Needless to say, the task of producing poetry of refinement and power from this creative-destructive paradox has not been easy. Given the kind of interior battle Hill's poetry wages—between a distrust of poetry itself and an allegiance to poetic tradition—it is not surprising that Hill has written so few poems in the past thirty years. His oeuvre is spare and brutal, and extraordinarily powerful.

How does Hill achieve this power in his work? The first poem of Hill's first book, called "Genesis," contains the seeds of a good many of his major themes:

I

Against the burly air I strode,
Where the tight ocean heaves its load,
Crying the miracles of God.

And first I brought the sea to bear
Upon the dead weight of the land;
And the waves flourished at my prayer,
The rivers spawned their sand.

And where the streams were salt and full
The tough pig-headed salmon strove,
Curbing the ebb and the tide's pull,
To reach the steady hills above.

II

The second day I stood and saw
The osprey plunge with triggered claw,
Feathering blood along the shore,
To lay the living sinew bare.

And the third day I cried: "Beware
The soft-voiced owl, the ferret's smile,
The hawk's deliberate stoop in air,
Cold eyes, and bodies hooped in steel,
Forever bent upon the kill."

III

And I renounced, on the fourth day,
This fierce and unregenerate clay,

Building as a huge myth for man
The watery Leviathan.

And made the glove-winged albatross
Scour the ashes of the sea
Where Capricorn and Zero cross,
A brooding immortality—
Such as the charmed phoenix has
In the unwithering tree.

IV

The phoenix burns as cold as frost;
And, like a legendary ghost,
The phantom-bird goes wild and lost,
Upon a pointless ocean tossed.

So, the fifth day, I turned again
To flesh and blood and the blood's pain.

V

On the sixth day, as I rode
In haste about the works of God,
With spurs I plucked the horse's blood.

By blood we live, the hot, the cold,
To ravage and redeem the world:
There is no bloodless myth will hold.

And by Christ's blood are men made free
Though in close shrouds their bodies lie
Under the rough pelt of the sea;

Though earth has rolled beneath her weight
The bones that cannot bear the light.

Hill views his subject, the creation of the world, through the eyes of a contemporary man, someone stung by the horrors that have taken place on this "fierce and unregenerate clay" since its genesis. The poem's mood, darkened by the "burly air" of history's pain and suffering, is unrelievedly bleak. "Genesis" is an exploration of the dark side of the creation myth. And because it is a vision "created" by the knowledge of the destruction the event will wreak ("By blood we live . . ."), the line "Crying the miracles of God" does not refer to the redemptive miracles of a benevolent God. On the contrary, the speaker is announcing, with irony, the "miracles" of destruction and pain, accompanied by the "crying" of real tears. The poem is, in its essence, a deeply

felt questioning of the idea of redemption.

In its fatalism Hill's sensibility is almost Hardy-esque, but Hardy's poems resolve themselves in a way Hill's do not. "Genesis" draws its bleak picture through displacement, a refusal on the poet's part to abide by the formal, musical, and to some degree intellectual principles of a more traditional kind of poetry. It uses gnarly, palpable sounds, surprising half-rhymes, plodding rhythms (as if the poem were being made to bear some incredible weight), and juxtapositions that purposefully set our sense awry. Although grounded in poetic tradition, "Genesis" resists lyrical mellifluousness and poetic catharsis. Although moving, it withholds some essential idea of artistic "beauty." The poem's power—which grows as we re-read it—derives from the way it refuses to resolve itself in an expected fashion. This refusal of resolution is the formal equivalent of the poem's theme, the impossibility of redemption on earth.

More readily understandable, more fully "resolved," poems in *For the Unfallen* illuminate the difficult poems of displacement. One such "easy" poem, often anthologized, is "In Memory of Jane Fraser."

When snow like sheep lay in the fold
And winds went begging at each door,
And the far hills were blue with cold,
And a cold shroud lay on the moor,

She kept the siege. And every day
We watched her brooding over death
Like a strong bird above its prey.
The room filled with the kettle's breath.

Damp curtains glued against the pane
Sealed time away. Her body froze
As if to freeze us all, and chain
Creation to a stunned repose.

She died before the world could stir.
In March the ice unloosed the brook
And water ruffled the sun's hair.
Dead cones upon the alder shook.

Though Hill's bleakness is plain—nature is

not seen as vibrant and colorful but as the pallid reflection of a dying woman—this poem does not question itself by means of deflection of obscurity. Its music and form offer the reader a feeling of hope—a stay against the darkness of its vision.

There is an element common to both the obscure and “easy” poems that gives us the sense that all is not lost in the world of poetry. This is Hill’s high rhetoric. It constitutes the poet’s central connection to the English poetic tradition, and it is what distinguishes him so sharply from his contemporaries. It is the quality against which all Hill’s self-questioning experimentalism must be placed. Donald Hall has written of Hill’s debt to Allen Tate, and of the way both Hill and Robert Lowell (Tate’s disciple) departed—in opposite directions—from their master. While Lowell broke free of tradition into a more immediate, day-by-day sense of “history,” Hill immersed himself deeper into the past and tradition. Hill took as his subjects mythology, English culture, wars, holocausts, martyrs, and poets; and his poetry became, as a result, tighter, densely impacted, and even more allusive than Tate’s. By the early Sixties, it was as difficult to conceive of Hill writing a poem about the mundane occurrences in a day’s routine—indeed, anything about himself or about the present—as it was to imagine Lowell adopting the creation myth as his subject. The divergence of the two poets probably had much to do with the differences between the English and the American temperament. Whatever the reason, Hill’s poetry has a moral depth that makes American experiments along the same lines appear almost gratuitous. And his obsession with tradition and history makes his “radicalism” appear, to American eyes, anything but radical. Indeed, because of its allusiveness, Hill’s voice seems to resemble that of the Metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century more than that of his contemporaries.

But the more tradition becomes inescapable for Hill, the more ambivalent about it he feels. If he is unable to ignore the litany of pain and despair on “this fierce and

unregenerate clay,” he is just as incapable of writing a poem that makes it into an aesthetic object. In “Two Formal Elegies,” written “for the Jews in Europe,” Hill transforms those killed in the holocaust into accusing figures who refuse to yield “their abused/Bodies” to the poet recollecting them in tranquility:

Knowing the dead, and how some are disposed:
Subdued under rubble, water, sand graves,
In clenched cinders not yielding their abused
Bodies and bonds to those whom war’s chance
saves

Without the law: we grasp, roughly in song.
Arrogant acceptance from which song derives
Is bedded with their blood, makes flourish
young

Roots in ashes. The wilderness revives,

Deceives with sweetness harshness

If, as survivors of the war, the young (a metaphor for poets) permit the “wilderness” to “revive” and deceive “with sweetness harshness,” they become, Hill suggests, complicitous in the destruction themselves. For to “sing” a deceptively sweet song is, in his view, an “arrogant acceptance” of the suffering of these martyrs. Among other things, the reviving wilderness cannot but mean here a normally resolving poem—one that, in its “beauty,” tramples on death and pain. “Grass resurrects to mask, to strangle,” says Hill in another poem, and those being strangled by nature’s—and the poet’s—renewing beauty are the dead.

The danger of falsifying and distorting history by making it poetically beautiful, objectified, something “out there,” is a major theme in Hill’s poetry. In “Annunciations,” he attacks the “cleansing” properties of poetry, which make the “stiffening-mire” of history into objects “clean to the touch.”

The Word has been abroad, is back, with a
tanned look

From its subsistence in the stiffening-mire.
Cleansing has become killing, the reward
Touchable, overt, clean to the touch.

Hill's dim view of the creation myth in "Genesis," we can now see, is also an assault on poetic creation as such: "'Beware/The soft-voiced owl . . . The hawk's deliberate stoop in air,/Cold eyes, and bodies hooped in steel,/Forever bent upon the kill.'"

When Hill questions, in the eighth poem of "Funeral Music," what seems to be the idea of an afterlife (the "timeless colloquy . . . beyond us"), the repository of souls he really has in mind is the realm of poetry. It constitutes, after all, a "distant sphere of harmony" where "all echoes" of individual, particular suffering "are the same." Poetry, like religion, "objectifies" and therefore falsifies life.

Not as we are but as we must appear,
Contractual ghosts of pity; not as we
Desire life but as they would have us live,
Set apart in timeless colloquy:
So it is required; so we bear witness,
Despite ourselves, to what is beyond us,
Each distant sphere of harmony forever
Poised, unanswerable . . .

"There are silences," says Hill in "The Guardians," and the remark reflects his own feelings of helplessness before the inability of poetry to do justice to the enormity of history. The "bones" that "cannot bear the light" in "Genesis"—the dead—begin to slip out of the poet's grasp entirely. Thus do Hill's poems often seem to shrink before our eyes. This is all he can muster by way of an elegy for yet another holocaust victim:

SEPTEMBER SONG

born 19.6.32—deported 24.9.42

Undesirable you may have been, untouchable
you were not. Not forgotten
or passed over at the proper time.

As estimated, you died. Things marched,
sufficient, to that end.
Just so much Zyklon and leather, patented
terror, so many routine cries.

(I have made
an elegy for myself it
is true)

September fattens on vines. Roses
flake from the wall. The smoke
of harmless fires drifts to my eyes.

This is plenty. This is more than enough.

There is here a clear, if humble, identification of the poet with the victim he is eulogizing; characteristically, the extinction in the poem extends to poetry itself.

The poem's of *King Log* resemble "September Song." In many respects, *King Log's* extreme difficulty and relentless excision is an act of revenge on the more fully resolved poems of *For the Unfallen*. Indeed, each book of Hill's career is a rebellion against its predecessor, a refusal to follow through or resolve the expectations aroused by an earlier book. In this way Hill enacts within his own poetic development the generational struggle between the old and the young, the dead and the living, that is the theme of his poetry. In "The Guardians" the old men watch "the safe/Packed harbours topple under sudden gales," while the young, "having risen early, had gone,/Some with excursions beyond the bay-mouth . . ."

Thus, in *King Log*, Hill goes about methodically excluding the kind of historical detail that might have survived in a poem from *For the Unfallen*. In an essay appended to the sequence called "Funeral Music," Hill includes what the poems omit. "Without attempting factual detail," he explains, "I had in mind the battle of Towton, fought on Palm Sunday, 1461," and then proceeds to give a fairly comprehensive account of the incident. As a result, the poems carry the deflection first observed in "Genesis" to an extreme, emptying themselves of any trace of narrative content.

It is important for us to understand that many of the poems in *King Log* remain close to tradition nonetheless. They are still products—especially "Funeral Music," which is

one of Hill's great achievements—of the dialectic between the poet and his precursors. Tradition remains the all powerful principle in even the most experimentally disjunct poems. As Hill's career progresses, tradition becomes so powerful, so admonishing that it threatens to silence the poet altogether. In "The Songbook of Sebastian Arrurruz," for instance, the "storm" of tradition "Broods over the dry earth" of Hill's own creative power, arresting his ability to pull himself out of the trap of self-referentiality.

Love, oh my love, it will come
Sure enough! A storm
Broods over the dry earth all day.
At night the shutters throb in its downpour.

The metaphor holds; is a snug house.
You are outside, lost somewhere. I find myself
Devouring verses of stranger passion
And exile. The exact words

Are fed into my blank hunger for you.

And when Hill does momentarily overcome the obstacle of tradition's "downpour," the result is tiny bits of metaphor unattached to anything resembling a poem.

i
Darkness
above all things
the Sun
makes
rise

ii
Vultures
salute their meat
at noon
(Hell is
silent)

iii
Blind Sun
our ravager
bless us
so that
we sleep.

This is one of "Four Poems Regarding the Endurance of Poets." It is a desperately moving testament to the unendurability of poetry. Hence, *King Log* ends with the poet

Scarcely speaking: it becomes as a
Coolness between neighbours. Often
There is this orgy of sleep. I wake
To caress propriety with odd words
And enjoy abstinence in a vocation
Of now-almost-meaningless despair.
(*"The Songbook of Sebastian Arrurruz"*)

Hill roused himself out of this "orgy of sleep" with the writing of *Mercian Hymns* in 1971. The book is an explosion. Gone are the formal stanzas, the rhymes, thematic consistency, and the structure of allusion. In their place is a radical obliquity that is deflection carried to an extreme. The paralyzing weight of tradition has been largely shucked; history, or what is left of it, is scattered in fragments throughout a series of thirty short prose-poems. The central consciousness of the poem is an eighth-century Midlands king named Offa. His reveries (which constitute the poems) are a dimensionless void of subjectivity where the tension between past and present, tradition and creation, is lost. The result is anachronism and confusion aplenty.

The danger of this experiment—which Hill is perfectly aware of—is that poetry becomes a formless repository of everything. The "garden" of "Sequence XII" is clearly the garden of verse; it wants upkeep, and "festers for attention": "telluric cultures enriched with shards, corms, nodules, the sunk solids of gravity." "I have accrued," says the poet, "a golden and stinking blaze."

As impenetrable as the poems in *Mercian Hymns* sometimes are, one thing is clear: their subject is an individual. The *Hymns* consist almost entirely of the meandering of Offa's mind. Through Offa, Hill seems to represent the individual ego breaking the shackles of history and tradition that so restricted utterance in *King Log*. The poet, in other words, no longer content to exercise

his ego through deflection, lets loose one long scream of bloody revenge against the power of the past. Perhaps the culture-at-large abetted the radical break of the “staggeringly gifted child,” as Hill says in one poem, from its “outclassed forefathers.” Hill wrote these poems between 1968 and 1971.

Offa parades his liberated self, but he is not as free of the past as he would have us think; and neither, by extension, is the poet. At the end of *Mercian Hymns* this unshackled ego “vanish[es],” leaving “behind coins, for his lodging, and traces of red mud.” Coins: poems, creative acts. Red mud: the blood of the inescapable earth.

“I cannot turn aside from what I do,” announces Hill in “Lachrimae,” a sonnet sequence in *Tenebrae* (1978) and the painful struggle with tradition and history that *Mercian Hymns* attempted to abandon begins again, in some of Hill’s strictest forms yet. The subjects explored in these poems are familiar: the failed gods of poetry and love, and the false hope of staying “amid the things that will not stay.” The artificial relief of religion is under especially pitiless scrutiny in *Tenebrae*. “Crucified Lord, you swim upon your cross/and never move.”

You are the castaway of drowned remorse,
you are the world’s atonement on the hill.
This is your body twisted by our skill
into a patience proper for redress.

(“Lachrimae”)

Hill finds discomfort in the comfort of God’s “timeless colloquy,” and the bleats of agony are exquisite.

Christ the deceiver
took all I had
his darkness ever
my fair reward

(“The Pentecost Castle”)

Such poems turn in on themselves—black holes of despair that swallow their tremendous internal energy before it can escape. They constitute some of contemporary poetry’s most powerful moments.

Like religion, love also holds out a promise of fulfillment—a perfect realm—that it cannot satisfy. It too comes under a cold and merciless and unerring scrutiny. Whatever we taste of love’s pleasure, says Hill, it will be gone tomorrow, and our sorrow will be deeper for love’s having tortured us with the illusion of permanence and happiness.

The crocus armies from the dead
rise up; the realm of love renews
the battle it was born to lose,
though for a time the snows have fled . . .

Hill leaves us without any hope of release from this predicament; even the poet’s escape from the pain of love into the “abstinence” of his chosen art form is unmasked as yet another fraud:

and abstinence crowns all our care
with martyr-laurels for this day.
Towers and steeples rise away
into the towering gulfs of air.
(“Veni Coronaberis”)

With savage irony (note the sing-song quality of the first two lines), Hill suggests that even abstinence can be fulfilled; hence the extraordinary image of unsatisfied, misguided lust in the last two lines. To Geoffrey Hill, the faintest whisper of possible consummation cheats life of its despair.

The subject of Hill’s newest book is Charles Péguy—an odd choice, considering what we know of Hill’s interests.

At first glance, there is nothing in Hill’s earlier work to prepare us for this *homage* to one of the strangest characters in the history of French poetry. When the forty-one-year-old Péguy was killed leading his company into battle at the Marne during the second week of World War I—according to legend he was shouting *Vive la France* the moment the fatal bullet struck the middle of his forehead—he was already a prime candidate for canonization as an intellectual martyr. The author of polemical essays and strangely beautiful poetry, and the editor, from 1900

to 1914, of the journal *Les Cahiers de la Quinzaine*, Péguy was an embattled, controversial figure. Brashly mixing socialism and nationalism, Catholic faith and anti-clericalism, militarism and a hatred of military authority, Péguy was a staunchly independent thinker, someone who endlessly frustrated those wanting to enlist him in what he saw as their corrupt causes. Péguy honed a sharp paradoxical style to go with his beliefs. "The life of an honest man must be a perpetual infidelity," he said, and it was only one of many remarks designed to rankle his contemporaries. Indeed, his final *Vive la France* notwithstanding, this "bag of contradictions," as one historian called him, even distrusted patriotism—at least the caricature of it that had emerged in France during the Dreyfus Affair.

But in an ironic twist that would not have amused the *sérieux* Péguy, the many groups, causes, and intellectual petitioners he had held at bay during his lifetime returned after his death to stake claims on his spirit. Perhaps it was the usefulness of having a "purist" on one's side. Whatever the case, Catholic groups that had bridled at his many "sins" while Péguy was alive extolled his ideas after his death, and in one case took his name; fascist groups of the Twenties and Thirties, whose anti-semitism Péguy would have excoriated, pointed to him as an intellectual precursor; and socialists whose ideologies Péguy would have mocked also found him useful for a footnote or two. The Vatican, which had considered Péguy a heretic while he lived, only recently bought his papers. Statues have been erected, squares named, even the building which housed *Les Cahiers* has been given a plaque—all in a futile effort to capture the spirit of a man whose essence was his refusal to be captured.

The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy, like the books that preceded it, metes out a harsh sentence to its predecessor. The rapid-fire bursts of *Tenebrae*, which superseded the gnomic mélange of *Mercian Hymns*, have been overtaken by an expansive voice—a voice largely unafraid of itself.

Vistas of richness and reward. The cedar
uprears its lawns of black cirrus. You have
found
hundred-fold return though in the land
of exile. You are Joseph the Provider;

and in the fable this is your proper home;
three sides of a courtyard where the bees thrum
in the crimped hedges and the pigeons flirt
and paddle, and sunlight pierces the heart-

shaped shutter-patterns in the afternoon,
shadows of fleurs-de-lys on the stone floors.
Here life is labour and pastime and orison
like something from a simple book of hours;

and immortality, your measured task,
inscribes its antique scars on the new desk
among your relics, bits of ivory quartz
and dented snuffbox won at Austerlitz.

The proofs pile up; the dead are made alive
to their posthumous fame. Here is the archive
of your stewardship; here is your true domaine,
its fields of discourse ripening to the Marne.

But for all the "vistas of richness and reward" such lines represent in Hill's oeuvre, one of the major characteristics of Hill's work remains: deflection and resistance to resolution. In the one-hundred quatrains of *Péguy* (divided into ten sections with varying numbers of stanzas), our vision is constantly deflected away from the "heroic" figure that was born with Péguy's death on the Marne (perpetrated by, among others, "church and civic dignitaries," as Hill puts it in a Note). Instead, we are pointed in the direction of a more subtle and far more important essence. The deliberately infelicitous, often rough iambic pentameter, the qualified half-rhymes, the confusing shifts of person, place, and perspective, the disorienting selection of another country's patriot, and the pervasive irony all conspire to shield this shadowy essence from distortion and abuse. Like the dead in "Two Formal Elegies" that withhold their bodies from the poet's aesthetic violation, Péguy's complex sensibility must be locked away for safekeeping, too. The cru-

cial difference is that Péguy is guarded not from the poet's potential distortion, but from the distortion of others. "The bones that cannot bear the light" are certainly the bones of Charles Péguy, but the "light" comes from Péguy's too-fervent admirers, not Geoffrey Hill.

Péguy begins with the murder of Jean Jaurès, the socialist deputy whom Péguy deeply admired during the Dreyfus Affair but later came to loathe for his corrupt socialism. After Péguy had (metaphorically) called for Jaurès's blood in *Les Cahiers*, a "young madman," as Hill recounts in his Note, "who may or may not have been oversusceptible to metaphor, almost immediately shot Jaurès through the head."

Crack of a starting-pistol. Jean Jaurès
dies in a wine-puddle. Who or what stares
through the café-window crêped in powder
smoke?

The bill for the new farce reads *Sleepers Awake*.

Hill relates this incident (the first of but three historical events included in the poem) because, like Péguy's death at the Marne, it helped "define" Péguy—albeit mistakenly—for generations of men. This particular incident promoted the popular image of Péguy as a prophet, while the battlefield-death supplied him his heroic cast. Hence, the "who or what" staring at the scene are those waiting in the wings, preparing to concoct the mythical Charles Péguy. The next stanza begins: "History commands the stage wielding a toy gun," suggesting that these fashioners of Péguy-icons for the delectation of "lame patriots" are making a threat (that is, presenting a false likeness) they really cannot make good on.

The real Charles Péguy is absent from the scene. Indeed, he does not appear at all until the last section of the poem—and then only in death. Hill seems to suggest that Péguy is simply too susceptible to distortion to be drawn from behind the curtain of this poem. When, in the fourth stanza, Hill asks, "Did Péguy kill Jaurès? Did he incite/the assassin? Must men stand by what they write . . . ?"

we know that Péguy is not available to respond. (Given Péguy's loquaciousness in life, this is especially ironic.) Instead, Hill conjures up alternate witnesses, the "fools and scoundrels" whose vision it is the poem's intention to confound.

Truth's pedagogue, braving an entrenched
class
of fools and scoundrels, children of the world,
his eyes caged and hostile behind glass—
still Péguy said that Hope is a little child.

It is the hidden man, "hostile behind glass," however, who retains the vision of hope.

In the poem's third section Péguy's absence is filled by a brilliant and sustained rendering of his "dream of France, militant-pastoral," including, among other things, Péguy's courtyard, his "dented snuffbox," the "shadows of fleurs-de-lys on the stone floors," Chateau de Trie, Chartres, and Colombey-les-deux-Eglises. This misty vision of prewar France certainly seems tangential to any serious consideration of Péguy—except in Hill's oblique homage. At the end of the section, Hill enjoins Péguy to "bid the grim *bonne-femme*/defend your door: 'M'sieur is not at home.'"

In the fourth part of the poem Hill elaborates on still another side issue—the new men of the twentieth century Péguy feared and hated so much.

This world is different, belongs to them—
the lords of limit and of contumely.
It matters little whether you go tamely
or with rage and defiance to your doom.

This is your enemies' country which they took
in the small hours an age before you woke,
went to the window, saw the mist-hewn
statues of the lean kine emerge at dawn.

Outflanked again, too bad! You still have pride,
haggard obliquities . . .

Yet these "enemies" too help define, in this poem of deflective definitions and "haggard obliquities," Charles Péguy. If they "out-

flanked" Péguy when he was alive, and in the years since his death, it is Hill's chance to help Péguy's spirit outflank them now.

In the fifth, and longest, section of *Péguy*, we are again "constrained/to leave [him] sleeping . . . to turn away and contemplate the working/of the radical soul . . ." Hill then scans, with satisfying and appropriate unpredictability, the "Hedgers and ditchers, quarrymen, thick-shod/curés de campagne, each with his load" and "coifed girls like geese, labourers cap in hand,/and walled gardens espaliered with angels" of the France Péguy loved and represented. Slowly, ever so slowly, Hill's portrait without a face emerges, through the accumulation of external detail, a creation mysteriously appropriate to Péguy's rugged and uncompromising nature.

With irresistible irony, Hill reminds us, in the sixth section, what the ordinary celebration of military valor requires—but what this extraordinary celebration must omit.

Here there should be a section without words
for military band alone: "Sambre et Meuse,"
the "Sidi Brahim" or "Le Roi s'Amuse". . .

This introduces the second historical event of the poem: Dreyfus's court martial. Hill presents this scene with all the hostility he can muster for the "patriots" responsible for this act of vicious cowardice. They are the forebears of our century's "lame patriots" who, in their own way, betrayed Péguy.

A puffy satrap prances on one leg
to snap the traitor's sword, his ordered
rage
bursting with "cran et gloire" and gouts of
rouge.
The chargers click and shiver . . .

. . . No wonder why
we fall to violence out of apathy . . .

This last phrase could have been uttered by Péguy. He certainly made his share of remarks about the Affair, all eminently quotable. But again Hill's ephemeral hero must

remain silent. Hence we find ourselves walking up yet another divergent path.

But who are "we," since history is law,
clad in our skins of silver, steel and hide,
or in our rags, with rotten teeth askew,
heroes or knaves as Clio shall decide?

This diverting question enables Hill to continue in the same vein, rather amusingly, for four stanzas more. Remarkably, however, the farther from view Hill positions Péguy, the clearer his significance becomes.

In part seven Hill lets loose some devastating irony for those who "still dutifully read/'heureux ceux qui sont morts.'" This line, from *Ève* (published in 1913), has established itself in the years since Péguy's death as the centerpiece of the standard French eulogy for those fallen in battle—fallen, as Hill scathingly writes, "'pour la patrie,' according to the book." And, in the eighth section,

. . . Death does you proud,
every heroic commonplace, "Amor,"
"Fidelitas," polished like old armour,
stamped forever into the featureless mud.

In the ninth section we encounter more irony. The "ancient landscape of green branches" in France is not, Hill suggests, as innocently beautiful as it seems to be. For as long as the landscape—like Péguy, like authentic patriotic feelings—is subject to the distortion and abuse of the "lords of limit and contumely" who so casually, hypocritically, and for their own devious purposes invoke it, we cannot permit ourselves to enjoy its beauty. Plainly, Hill is "reviving" another "wilderness" (as he does in "Two Formal Elegies") to show how it deceives with "sweetness harshness," but the poet is no longer committing the crime. The "lame patriots" of France—along with the Church, the socialists, and the fascists—are the evil-doers. "Ah, such a land/the Ile de France once was . . ." says Hill, and his nostalgia is shot through with irony. To present the Ile de France any other way would make one

complicitous with those who have exulted in its beauty at the expense of the “haggardly oblique” dead, like Péguy.

In the last section Péguy finally appears—only to fall dead in the field of beetroot. The wound in his forehead is, says Hill, “a simple lesion of the complex brain.” The metaphor is apt. The utter “simplicity” of labeling Péguy a hero is indeed a “lesion” on the brain of Péguy’s real complexity and intelligence. Similarly, the necessary transformation that landscape, innocence, beauty, and nostalgia (to name only a few this poem conjures up) have experienced in our century is nothing if not a bleeding lesion that can only be stanching, temporarily, with irony. Hill scarcely relishes this dark scenario: if anything, *Péguy* registers his unfathomable disgust with this world created by the “lords of limit and contumely.”

The hope—and there is hope—lies with Péguy, who is still, at the poem’s end, hidden: “his arm over his face as though in sleep/or to ward off the sun.” His resistance to the sun, the “light” of which disables so severely, seems to be a triumphant gesture, a gesture of self-protection and disobedience. It shields Péguy’s quirky patriotism and subtle mind from the narrow notions of “patriotism” and “intelligence” that are common currency today.

Hill has time for one final, consummate irony in the poem’s last lines. He assures the “lords of limit” that they are able to

... come to the salute
at every hole-and-corner burial-rite
bellowed with hoarse dignity to the wind.

Take that for your example! But still mourn,
being so moved: éloge and elegy
so moving on the scene as if to cry
“in memory of those things these words were
born.”

Take that for your example: Hill heaves the popular, heroic version of Péguy, “bellowed with hoarse dignity to the wind,” back at its creators. *Take that for your example*, says Hill, for we have a better one, hidden behind

Péguy’s arm on the beetroot field, safely shrouded in Hill’s oblique poem. We can even “still mourn” for our hidden Péguy, on the condition that our mournful, elegiac feeling—expressed in the plainly nostalgic last line—is kept in ironical, distancing quotation marks. We can be moved by elegy, we can feel nostalgia, we can cry for Péguy—only “as if” we are experiencing them. The emotional fraudulence of our century runs so deep that we must continually question feelings as seemingly harmless as nostalgia for the past and reverence for nature.

Péguy is an extraordinary achievement for many reasons. For one thing, the execution of the conception is flawless. This is not surprising from Hill; what is surprising is that he sustains it over such a long poem. But most astonishing of all is the way *Péguy* emerges, for all its endless qualification, deflection, and irony, as a patriotic song for a fallen hero. But isn’t this what Hill wished to avoid? Yes, but in the same remarkable way Hill’s earlier poetry was successful *as poetry* while in a deep sense *refusing to be poetry*, so Hill’s patriotic homage succeeds while continually indicating that such an effort is impossible. This sort of paradox has always been at the center of Geoffrey Hill’s work. It has been largely responsible for Hill’s scarce output. Yet in *Péguy* this paradox has been conducted over an immensely broad canvas—one with space enough to explore the dilemma of paying proper homage in an age rife with false or compromised homages. All of this makes *Péguy* one of the most serious and important long poems written in recent memory.

Yet the question remains: what is it about Charles Péguy that gives Hill the courage to create his own homage in such a hopelessly impure environment? It is not simply that Péguy himself has stimulated so many inauthentic homages springing from impure motives. For an answer we must turn to some of the details Hill was required to omit from the poem itself.

When Charles Péguy published his long poem *Le Mystère de la Charité de Jeanne d’Arc*

in 1910² he was an isolated man. For years he had been upbraiding everyone he could lay hold of in the pages of *Les Cahiers*: politicians, theologians, intellectuals. Even close friends had come under attack. Whether he wrote about the holiness of poverty, the sanctity of tradition, the hypocrisy of the idea of equality, or the shallowness of the Church's believers (he called them "ready-made souls"), someone was bound to be offended.

But if Péguy was alone it was hardly his fault. (At least, so he felt.) It was the fault of the modern age. Péguy believed that the twentieth century's lack of spirituality—he called it *mystique*—had forced men to adopt rigid, narrow views. (The "lords of limit" and contumely, in Hill's poem.) These professional politicians, professional theologians, and professional intellectuals who had come into power took no interest in Péguy's little world of contradiction and paradox, where deep spiritual belief was at the root of every action and every word and gave things of the earth such richness and dimension.

It was this atmosphere of imminent crisis that led Péguy to think that the *mystique* which had withered away during the nineteenth century was about to re-emerge to bring France to life again. He felt it would happen soon, and when it did, all the corrupt Church Fathers, the bought-off socialists, and the anti-Semitic nationalists would have to come clean. France would then rise up out of the doldrums (Péguy always claimed he was living in an *epoch*—during which nothing interesting happened—rather than an *era*—which was historically significant), and he, Charles Péguy, might even be vindicated. Subscribers to *Les Cahiers* might even start reading it.

But the return to spirituality—to Péguy's *mystique*—never happened. Péguy thought it would occur when the Dreyfus case was reopened (to street battles) in 1898, but that

hope was dashed. "I shall always remain inconsolable," said Péguy with reference to the Affair. Then Péguy thought that if spiritual rejuvenation could not take place in France, he would write a poem about such a previous rejuvenation in history. Although he chose Joan of Arc as his exemplar of spiritual renewal, he hoped readers would see her as the kind of prophet needed by the twentieth century. The complaint made to God in the poem, "There is never anything . . . if only we could see the daybreak of your kingdom," is as much about Péguy's time as it is about Joan's. Divine intervention in the form of voices heard by Joan was precisely the way *mystique* manifested itself. Péguy, needless to say, believed his own poetic voice carried forth the tradition of a re-emergent *mystique*, learned from Joan. At any rate, this explained to Péguy (and Péguy alone, since no one else was by now listening) why he suffered such isolation. He, like Joan, was misunderstood, and a perfect candidate for martyrdom.

Péguy knew that the resurgence of *mystique* in twentieth-century France would be, as it had been five hundred years earlier, a revolutionary event. Unlike secular revolutions (which, Péguy felt, were always cynical and misguided), this would be a crusade for truth. To paraphrase Péguy, the real Church was revolutionary, designed to overthrow the pagan order. And it was the job of an embattled "infidel" in the pagan order to correct the "renascent error" of the pagan past.

Now Geoffrey Hill scarcely believes in the re-emergence of *mystique*. What he does believe in—and what Péguy's martyrdom at the hands of the groups and causes he shunned during his life signifies—is the paradoxical command within tradition to revolt. Hill's career has been, above all, a rebellion against the "orthodoxy" of that which precedes him³

2 Originally published in *Les Cahiers de la Quinzaine*, January 16, 1910. Julien Green's English translation, entitled *The Mystery of the Charity of Joan of Arc*, was published in the U.S. by Pantheon Books in 1950.

3 Not that any of the early work should be revalued. On the contrary, it becomes even more important. As Péguy said, in one of his best paradoxes ever, "The sinner is at the very heart of Christianity." Why? "Because the sinner can make the best prayer."

—right down to his deflective lines. With *Péguy*, Hill revolts against the silencing, self-referential obsession with “the Word.” If *Péguy* means anything in this sense, it is as testament to the endless process of renewal, the drama of generations, that is at the center of man and his world—and of the poetry of Geoffrey Hill. If the spiritual core animating this renewing process—found in the writings of Péguy—must be masked by Hill by means of endless deflection and displacement and the “haggard obliquities” of the *Péguy* poem, it only shows how much of an “infidelity” such a rebellion can be. All Hill can do is write a poem inspired by his latest rebellion, not *about* it.

The central nugget in Charles Péguy’s writing that sparked Hill’s latest rebellion is charity. To Péguy, a Catholic, Christian charity meant that giving without receiving, creating without demanding redemption, and loving without requiring fulfillment were all earthly reflections of the selfless love of God. Hill, for his part, is in all likelihood not a practitioner of Christian charity. But another kind of charity, a secular version of what Péguy practiced, seems very much to have inspired Hill in the writing of *Péguy*. In “Annunciations,” Hill wrote:

O Love, subject of the mere diurnal grind,
Forever being pledged to be redeemed,
Expose yourself to charity; be assured
The body is but husk and excrement . . .

When this poem was written, love demanded fulfillment, but was incapable of achieving it. And Hill’s poetry reflected this impossibility of fulfillment by continually deflecting away from normal aesthetic resolution. Indeed, to write a poem that achieved resolution was to Hill an act of fraud; hence his subjection of it to such debilitating, scorching scrutiny. But Charles Péguy, who derived a comparable inspiration from Joan, has revealed charity to Hill, which allows Hill, if not entirely to escape this deflective procedure, then at least to divert it away from himself and his own creations. The self-referential obsession is no longer the source and object of Hill’s high, moral castigation: the bad creations of others are. And the “creation” of the Péguy-myth was the natural object to undo, since it was Péguy’s example that permitted Hill to escape continued self-laceration.

If Hill cannot entirely give up deflection and obliquity as methods, it is because this would be too radical a break with his own past as a poet. They still function usefully as a mode of expression for Hill. And as Péguy said, “Charity,” which is “full of war,” is “at once deeply conservative and deeply revolutionary.” It is this paradoxical truth that allows Hill both to break with his past and to remain true to his vision. It is, in other words, what allows him to continue to create some of the most significant poetry of our time.

Paula Modersohn-Becker: artist into icon

by Dan Hofstadter

Paula Modersohn-Becker's *Self-Portrait in Front of Paris Buildings* (1900) shows a dark face dimly projected against a brilliantly lighted wall. It's a tiny, prettily colored painting reminiscent of the early Vuillard, except that Vuillard would never have painted so frontal, so hieratic a self-representation. From the picture's roiled surface a splayed, witchy gaze bears down upon you: those almond-shaped eyes sit so far apart they seem to grip you in a vice. This, you might think, is the stuff that legendary headmistresses are made of, except for a few curious details. The gelid, archaic smile seems at times to lapse into a decidedly schoolgirlish smirk, and from the collar droops an equally schoolgirlish bow, the sort of bow that goes with a pinafore. This is the sort of person you seem to remember from childhood or a dream. Perhaps she reminds you of the tallest girl in the class—the one you and everybody else looked up to—and the way she'd come over to you making her famous "weird face" and you'd try not to show you were frightened.

This mood of holy silliness—this inability to look in the mirror and paint oneself without hamming it up—is typical of Modersohn-Becker's self-portraits. A consequence is the dissimilarity of the faces portrayed: the "weird face," for example, doesn't look much like the "lady of mystery" face. Some of her charming self-portraits do rather resemble her, but they are so stylistically dissimilar that like a collection of odds socks they never really seem to match up. Standing

before them you want to say, "That's her!" but because of the borrowed manners and the artificiality of feeling, you can't. It's disappointing: you expect to see a spirit raised and what you get is some funny faces.

Most of Paula Modersohn-Becker's art bears the stamp of this arch, gauche attempt at self-registration. Born in December, 1876, dead by the age of thirty-one, she spent her last decade on a career at painful variance with her upbringing. As if it weren't hard enough to be a woman artist in those days, she painted daring proto-expressionist pictures that almost nobody saw and that scarcely anybody liked. She was a friend—in the widest sense of the word—of Rainer Maria Rilke, and it is through his "Requiem" in her memory, and through his letters, that many people first learn of her. In 1917 her own letters and journals were published in Hannover and almost at once they enjoyed a great vogue. They have been reprinted at least twelve times in Leipzig and also, more recently, in Frankfurt, in an expanded, probably definitive, edition.¹

The publication of these documents has

1 *Paula Modersohn-Becker in Briefen und Tagebüchern*, edited by Günter Busch and Liselotte von Reinken, with a commentary by Günter Busch; S. Fischer Verlag, 1979. The English translation is by Arthur S. Wensinger and Carole Clew Hoey: *Paula Modersohn-Becker: The Letters and Journals*; Tapplinger, 397 pages; \$17.95. For smoothness, I have made slight changes in the passages I have quoted.

greatly complicated the task of coming to terms with Modersohn-Becker's art. Familiarity with a painter's life commonly disposes people to see his or her work in a certain way. In the present case the task is further confused by the artist's being a woman in the age of marital desacralization—the age of Ibsen and Strindberg—and by her rebellious though not consciously feminist behavior. Most unsettling, however, is the way her writings have been posthumously represented. From the first, it seems, they have been served up, like Marcus Aurelius or Omar Khayyam, as five-star inspirational fodder, the oats of the superior soul. At the same time they compose an autobiography literate enough to be claimed for Literature and appealing enough to become, in the words of Günter Busch, the director of the Kunsthalle Bremen, a “veritable classic in the German-speaking world.” Apparently this appeal doesn't stop at the German frontier: Jane Kallir, for instance, who wrote the catalogue essay for a recent exhibition of Modersohn-Becker's work at the Galerie St. Etienne,² finds Modersohn-Becker's personal chronicle “as compelling as fiction.” But that is not all the tangle. Since Modersohn-Becker is seen by many as a prophetess, “an innovator who paved the way for modern art,” as Herr Busch puts it, her posthumous book has for them a devotional value: its heroine is not only the protagonist of a gripping story but also an example to us all, a model girl. As if this weren't enough to unravel, her letters are full of observations about art, which, like any such criticism, can be judged right or wrong, insightful or obtuse. Trying to make out Modersohn-Becker's testament is a bit like being handed a new tool in woodworking class without being told what it's for. Maybe it'll do almost anything; maybe it's just a nuisance.

2 “Paula Modersohn-Becker: Germany's Pioneer Modernist” was shown at the Galerie St. Etienne in New York from November 15, 1983, through January 7, 1984. It was assembled with the help of the Paula Modersohn-Becker Stiftung in Bremen and several German art specialists, notably Günter Busch.

After looking at the recent exhibition at the Galerie St. Etienne I came to the conclusion that the letters and journals predispose people in the wrong way—or any number of wrong ways—when they come to consider the pictures. The show at the Galerie St. Etienne, the most comprehensive exhibition of the painter's work ever mounted in the United States, was well-lighted, thoughtfully presented, and just pedagogical enough to teach us a few things without telling us what to think. There were twenty-seven paintings, sixty-three drawings, and ten prints, most of the pictures being in the rather small sizes that Modersohn-Becker preferred. If far too many of the early and student works and far too few of the late pictures were offered, that was probably because of material limitations. Nonetheless, one could see a tendency here as elsewhere to make a relic of everything Modersohn-Becker did, doubtless because her career was so short and, to some, so exemplary. This is a mistake: a gallery is not a reliquary. She didn't draw well, and, conscious of it, she went about repairing her faults with bouts of academic croquis that only made matters worse. To present such timid, often overscaled flops alongside her lively little paintings only blocks the view. The show also led me to another unpleasant realization: many of Modersohn-Becker's paintings have duller colors than their reproductions in the accompanying catalogue or in the two authoritative picture books, Herr Busch's *Paula Modersohn-Becker: Malerin, Zeichnerin*, and Christa Murken-Altrogge's *Paula Modersohn-Becker: Leben und Werk*. This makes us feel that the paintings are really reproductions of the photographs, a sorry sensation not unfamiliar to buyers of art books. The letdown is compounded by the fact that Modersohn-Becker's paintings *ought* to be about as bright as they are in the photographs; in reality they are often too muted and seem to swim in a smokey gravy as if they were ill, not quite themselves. This is particularly true of the landscape sketches. Probably their hues were delicately chosen, but the intensity of the outdoor light falling on the panels deceived the artist into think-

ing everything a notch or two more brilliant than it was. An outdoor show would probably do wonders for these paintings by restoring them to their primal habitat. Unfortunately, such pictures are meant to be hung indoors. This is one of the ways in which Modersohn-Becker's paintings are not what they're cracked up to be; it's also one of the problems she almost certainly would have solved had she lived longer. The pity of it is that we can only guess, by following the story of her life, at what she might have become.

Opening the mail was a quasi-religious rite in the official residence on the Schwachhauser Chaussee in Bremen, Paula's childhood home. Neither the little twins, nor any of the four elder children who might be at home, nor even Carl Woldemar Becker himself, director of the railway for this Hanseatic city, ever opened the mail before Frau Becker. The exalting feel of a letter knife gliding along the inside of an envelope, Herr Becker once wrote Paula when she was away at school, was Frau Becker's principal pleasure. "And so everything has to wait until the moment Mother has finished her toilette and makes an entrance in her brown dressing gown. Very deliberately the coffee is poured, the envelopes are sorted, and the twins are admonished to pay attention quietly, until gradually the proper mood has been conjured up. Then the envelopes are opened very neatly with the paper knife and, *coram publico*, the reading begins. Everything must be in order, and Kurt's letter comes first. The good lad has been writing regularly up to now and every time we get a letter Mother casts a scornful look in my direction, for I had been prophesying in my pessimism that she had better not count . . . on regular correspondence She says, 'You have no faith in our children.'"

This passage perfectly expresses the charm of Herr Becker and his family. It also reveals the disparity between his way of being fond of the children and Frau Becker's. Herr Becker, who'd had a rough time in his youth, was aware of the difficulties of growing up

and wished to share his practical wisdom. He was in the midst of persuading young Paula, for instance, to study at a teachers' college. Frau Becker, on the other hand, was a doting mother for whom the contemplation of her children was a perpetual epiphany.

In 1896 Paula chose to supplement her conventional education with a few months of art study in Berlin. Drawing soon became her ruling passion. Her parents' response, enlightened though it was, couldn't have been more intimidating. Herr Becker told Frau Becker that Paula was a "sulky creature . . . more critical of others than she is of herself" and proceeded forthwith to provide her with all the criticism she might need. Within a year, in fact, he had become a consummate art critic, a *Besserwisser* hewn in marble. "As far as the head in red chalk is concerned," he wrote her about one of her drawings, "the light and the shaded areas seem to me to have too sharp a contrast, and the light areas . . . are not sufficiently modulated. Whereas with charcoal one can achieve considerable technique by softening and wiping, with red chalk the drawing is everything. I speak to the extent I understand such things." She wrote back: "Pay very close attention and see if you don't feel the breath of a kiss on your right cheek. I am sending you more drawings of heads. I hope this whole business is not boring you." "You seem," he replied, "to place too much emphasis on the total impression and too little on details." Easily bright enough to see that he was daunting his daughter, Herr Becker tried to moderate his objections, even apologizing for his captious taste. But as the months went by and she failed to become a new Michelangelo, he lost patience and his barbs grew sharper. His pension, he reminded her, was small. How would she ever support herself? Unwittingly, he turned into a character out of the Grimms, a spellbound creature who wanted to speak but could only bark. Frau Becker knew better. "The life studies are splendid," she wrote. "I sense that these are the things that interest you most deeply, dear heart, and that your teachers are satisfied with you, and that the stern

Fräulein Hönerbach is praising you. What good fortune!"

In the summer of 1897 Paula spent a few weeks at Worpswede, an artists' colony about fifteen miles northeast of Bremen. The painters there practiced a Barbizon-like romantic naturalism with heavy overtones of what the Germans call "atmospheric lyricism" and "homeland art." In short, the "spirit of the spot" was studiously preserved, as it tends to be in all Northern European image-making. Worpswede was a "singular county," as Rilke (soon to be much in evidence thereabouts) observed in an essay on the place. "If you stand on one of the little Worpswede sandhills, you can see it sprawling about you like a peasant shawl from whose dark corners grow smoldering flowers. It lies flat, almost without a single fold, and the roads and watercourses lead far away into the horizon. There begins a sky of unbelievable changes and splendors. It is reflected in every leaf; all things seem to be busy with it; it is everywhere."

Among the painters under this sky were some highly talented men, such as Fritz Overbeck, Fritz Mackensen, and Otto Modersohn, whom Herr Becker had already met and found shy and prudish. Paula would eventually marry Otto Modersohn, but for the time being she studied informally under Mackensen. One of her fellow pupils was the strapping young sculptress Clara Westhoff, Rilke's future wife. Paula and Clara soon found themselves sharing a friendship of such molten intensity that those about them must have wondered into what curious form it would eventually cool. Clara left a touching account of her first meeting with Paula:

There [she] sat . . . in my studio in her painting smock, without a hat, on a podium meant for my models She was holding on her lap a copper kettle which she had repaired . . . ; and she sat there and watched me work. The kettle had the color of her own beautiful and abundant hair, which was parted in the middle and loosely brushed back and swept up in three great rolls at the nape of the neck. In its

full weight her hair functioned as a counterpoint to her light and sparkling face with its prettily curved and finely drawn nose. She would raise her face with an expression of enjoyment, as if above a surface, and from it her dark and brilliantly brown eyes looked at me intelligently and merrily.

Shortly after Paula decided to join the Worpswede colony she inherited from a great-aunt money enough to continue her artistic education. She read a lot of highfalutin self-improvement literature—Maeterlinck, the *Journal* of Marie Bashkirtsev, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*—and worked hard on peasant-filled pictures of the sort popularized by one of her favorite painters, Charles Cottet. In these images, oldsters who seem to have been dug up in the parsnip patch—actually she found them in the poorhouse—stare into vacancy as at an empty plate. By and large these pictures, some of which were hung at the Galerie St. Etienne, represent a naïve rethinking of the rural-hardship theme, already hackneyed in European art. Still, Paula was discovering herself at Worpswede. "I want to live here," she wrote a favorite aunt. "I want to *live*—and develop further as a person and as an artist. I'm getting closer to all these fine people and feel that I'm learning a great deal from them. I want to strive to make of myself the best I possibly can. I know it's egotistic but it's an egotism that is great and noble and that subjects itself to the one big cause in my life."

On New Year's Day, 1900, at the age of twenty-four, Paula made the journey to Paris, the first of four such trips over the next few years. Her growing acquaintance with French art would eventually lead her to attempt a synthesis of German romantic realism and French modernism. Nonetheless, she at first disliked the Parisians: "They can be witty or lively, but that simple, deep, and great feeling that we [Germans] have, that's something that they know little about. I have noticed [the same thing] in their art I do think that we Germans are better people The only thing about [the French] that really speaks is their nerves."

Despite her disdain for the French, Paula got right down to work, enrolling in the Académie Cola Rossi, where she studied anatomy and academic drawing. To judge by her description, the young painters of the day must have had good connections in the costumes department of the Théâtre-Français, for extravagant sashes, bows, togas, and hoods were worn as much at school as in the streets. After a while Paula was obliged to own that the French could shake a thing or two out of their sleeves. "There is much esprit in the art here," she wrote her father. "Simply the way they apply paint to canvas is extremely ingenious." He perked up; perhaps she herself was about to acquire some "esprit." "You, my dear diamond, didn't land in the proper polishing shop," he wrote in his rueful answering note. "You were too hard for it . . ." Yet his fancies darkened again as he pictured himself visiting his daughter's abode—the "hideous" building, the "worn out greasy" stair, the "sickly sweet hospital smell." He grew faint as he saw himself folding his poor loins onto Paula's "martyr's bed," and the vision faded in a maze of filthy corridors, smoking stoves, and nauseating dustbins.

A neighbor of Paula's during her first Paris sojourn was her friend Clara from Worpswede. By this time Paula had conceived a shy love for Otto Modersohn, and Clara was carrying the diminutive Rilke in her pocket like a baby kangaroo. Even so, a triangular intimacy grew unchecked among Paula, Clara, and Rilke. There may well have been an erotic attraction between Paula and Rilke, but if so, it proved weaker than their need for security, a security that he would find transiently with Clara and that she would find, just as transiently, with Otto. Paula and Clara also grew deeply attached, their friendship resembling, in its fierce jealousy, the affections of adolescent girls.

Rilke jotted in his journal that Paula's "hair was of Florentine gold, her voice had folds like silk, I never saw her so slender and gentle in her white maidenhood." And from her he received this note: "We waited for

you at twilight, my little room and I, and on the red table are autumn mignonottes, and the clock has stopped ticking. But you do not come. We are sad . . . Clara Westhoff and I, we were speaking recently and saying that you are an idea of ours that has become real, a wish fulfilled." This is pretty inflammable stuff, even if it is cleverly ambiguous, and he replied in verses no less highly charged. "It is so strange, being young and giving blessings./And yet I thirst to do so: To meet you at the edge of words,/and to rest in your hands at evening/my hands which turn the pages/of books I have laid aside." Here he had hit the requisite note of *fin-de-siècle* exaltation, and she responded with her own strain of verbal *Schwärmerei*:

I feel as if the barricades are falling which one has built up wearily and small-mindedly against so many things and so many people; as if one were progressing, as if the vase could contain more and more, as if each year a new white rose could bloom in it, beckon to the others, shine into their midst and stroke their cheeks with its shimmer and fill the world with beauty and fragrance. And that is life, a life like a prayer, a pious prayer, a jubilant prayer, a lovely and smiling prayer . . .

Yet soon the tone of her letters changed, failed to balance in this scented air, and tumbled into deepest despondency. From Bremen, to which she had returned for Christmas, she wrote the poet in a mood of self-concealed grief:

I'm sitting in the bay window over the river and letting the water glide past below me. Usually this water makes me so sad. It's so slow and soundless and patient and the long barges rest upon it as if they were quietly crying. Really all the other things around the water here are crying, the great red warehouses and the little white buildings, and when they are reflected in the water they tremble and cry even harder. But I think they are not crying today. Because it is Christmas. The houses, I believe, are not crying today nor is the water, but the water is still and old and sad and good,

and smiles very seldom and as if in pain; for life has made it yellow and murky. It is like my dear father.

Old Woldemar Becker was dying, and Rilke was scarcely the man to replace him. At all events, the fatherly, bearded figure of Otto Modersohn had already heaved into view.

Paula married Otto Modersohn in 1901 and moved into his Worpswede house. He was lately widowed; when they'd first met his wife had still been alive. For one who looked like an ill-disguised Reynard the Fox he was curiously, even childishly, guileless. Her feelings about him were compounded of genuine fondness, gratitude for a safe berth, and a certain Prussian dutifulness that was not without an undertow of hysteria. Toward the end of her first year of marriage, she wrote that she "cried a great deal and my tears come often like the great tears of childhood When all is said and done, I'm probably just as lonely as when I was a child In the old days, I think, feelings like this made one enter a nunnery." Otto suspected none of this. "In our passions Paula and I fit together superbly," he wrote in his diary.

Almost from the first, this union had an acrid, Strindbergian taste. He was deeply in love when they married, and she devoted herself to him and to his little daughter Elsbeth. Presently, however, the self-doubting, sentimental man found himself tortured by misgivings about her: "Think it is terrible, barbaric, brutal, just to think of oneself . . . to kick other people," he complained to his journal. "That's the way Rilke and his wife are. [Paula] is also quite accomplished in the realm of egotism. Whoever is not deep enough or fine enough in her estimation is pushed aside gruffly and ruthlessly. If this goes on much longer we will soon be alone."

What happened, however, was that he and Elsbeth were left more and more often alone as Paula, increasingly magnetized by Paris over the next few years, prolonged her sojourns there. Approaching thirty, she was

seized by a desire to achieve a pronounced artistic selfhood before her birthday. Though couched in Nietzschean rhetoric, this was a pathetic and even maniacal passion. "If my love for you sometimes seems to be lacking," she wrote to her mother, "please remember that what I am pursuing is my own future I don't know whether this is still a kind of egotism, but if it is, it is the noblest kind." Seen from Paula's new quarters in the rue Vaugirard, Otto and Elsbeth receded into the past, became tiny figures in a remote and circumscribed landscape. Before long she was firing off double-barreled letters to Otto beseeching him to give her up while demanding that he send her more money. When she finally did turn the dread age of thirty, she experienced a moment of satisfaction when a sculptor named Bernhard Hoetger proclaimed the uniqueness of her artistic vision. She would die a year later.

Much has been made of a passage in Paula's journal where she predicts her own early death. But many young people entertain such fantasies. Paula's most revealing remark about mortality, as Heinrich Wigand Petzet has observed, was that "Motherhood and Death really are the biggest things in this world." The linking of the two nouns is revealing. Just as the phrase "blood and soil" contains the implication that blood *is* soil, so Paula's epigram suggests that motherhood is death. Her relations with her mother, despite their appearance of outward warmth, may well have held a great deal of suffocated hostility, and it cannot have been easy for her to play the role of a larger-than-life helpmeet (*ein geniales Frauenzimmer*) as Otto Modersohn transparently expected. Many of her Worpswede paintings express a troubled fascination with motherhood, breast-feeding, and daughters; there is even a picture of little Elsbeth looking weirdly pregnant beside a spray of foxgloves. Her pictures of potato-nosed women and girls in the boggy, threatening landscape of Lower Saxony, overgrown as one feels with yarrow and burdock, reeking of cowpatties and smokehouses, bristling with rotten fences and ensnaring stiles, are among her most

affecting. Here the sentiment of her earlier Cottet-type peasant pictures is suspended, as it were, in the medium of her anxiety about womanhood.

I think, as Otto Modersohn thought, that Paula never fully learned to put together a full-scale, generous, breathing image—to invent a rich, complete-seeming composition without sacrificing the sense of intimacy, of votive self-presentation, that she struggled so hard to achieve. Many of her pictures are crabbed and niggling. Frequently they depend on irrational elements—a twinging color that seems not to belong, a stab at a poetic association—instead of on strong design. Still, they have at their best a strange power of enchantment. I refer to her pickled-vegetable-colored girls of 1901 (variations, really, on the Northern European “sick girl” theme); the *Woman Before a Window* of 1902/3, with its mood of pathos and hypnotic sage-green landscape rustling in the background like some Wilhelminian gown; and the arresting, Bonnardesque *Head of a Young Girl with a Straw Hat* of 1905. Among her little triumphs are the *Woman with a Poppy* of 1900, in which the poppy on its stem is balanced, as if in analogy, against a female head, and *The Good Samaritan* of 1907, her only entirely original work. This image (symbolic, I suspect, of the artist’s learning to take pity on herself) uses the *cloisonné* outlines and bright colors that Kandinsky later put to such striking effect. Everything here seems right: the Samaritan bending in commiseration, the turbanned figures passing, the hoarsely warm colors, the gentle way the donkey stands shaded, the fine simplicity of the *bonshommes*.

If the Modersohn ménage reminds one of Strindberg, the particular play might be *The Stronger*. The stronger was Paula. Otto Modersohn almost managed to destroy his reputation with his disastrous pictures of the interwar period, but Paula helped him rise to remarkable heights. In the literature on the Worpswedes, Otto is usually portrayed as a wimp, and, despite his skill as a painter, he did lack her drive and imagina-

tion. Soon after their union he began to follow her lead. For a while, to judge by his journal, he could hardly paint without her: they worked outdoors, side by side, so he could scrutinize her freshness of approach.

Paula’s landscape sketches, especially those executed around the Worpswede sandhills, are on the whole too muted in tone, but they do embody one great quality that, though native to her, must have been bolstered by the Nabis’ example. This was a certain “negative capability” in the sketching of natural formations. If Paula rarely designed well, she also did not overdesign, and in these sketches, where a designed look isn’t really called for, her ability to be decisively indecisive, to render the hesitant and eccentric outlines of moors and woods, stood her in good stead. The odd thing is that Otto, toddling along beside her, surpassed her if only in this. On the assumption that the reproductions in the catalogue of his landscapes put out by the Hamburg and Bremen museums are reliable, the man was a superb sketcher: he’s been unjustly neglected. If ever the pair’s sketches are shown together—a delightful thought—his *Mädchen am Birkenstamm* (1901), *Bretterzaun gegen Luft* (1902), *Moorgaben mit Spiegelung* (1902), and his superb *Durchblick in der Worpsweder Wohnung* (1903) would have to be given pride of place. His little paintings of 1907-10, that is, the period right after Paula’s death, are equally good if not better. Never has woman made man use his talent as Paula made Otto use his.

We’ve seen that when Paula first arrived in Paris in 1900 she was tempted to dismiss all French painting as the mere expression of “nerves.” Within about five months, however, she had changed her tune. The Germans may well have been better as people, but the French *Painted* better in every way. No longer to be dismissed, they were now to be ransacked, and ransack she did, trading on an awareness that secondhand ideas might be imported to Germany and refurbished, indeed actually renewed, if thoughtfully crossbred with whatever was vigorous

in the Lower Saxon visual strain. With the semi-creative opportunism so typical of a certain sort of artist, she scraped every useful acquaintance, made mental notes on every "advanced" canvas in every enlightened picture dealer's shop. Virtually all the new ideas in turn-of-the-century Parisian art turned up pell-mell in her work. She had so nice a divining rod for current visual notions that they appeared in her own painting only a few months after they'd first been viewable at Vollard's or the Galerie Simon. The art historian Christa Murken-Altrogge, who can scarcely be accused of antipathy toward Paula, traced the French influences on her work in an article published in *Die Kunst und das schöne Heim* in 1975. What emerges is the chronicle of a rapid and barbaric switching of allegiance from idol to idol during a roughly six-year period. Even Picasso, whose primitivistic, proto-Cubist heads of 1906 some of her portraits have been thought to predate, is believed by Murken-Altrogge to have been an inspiration. "In all likelihood," writes Murken-Altrogge, "the young painter had already been struck by Picasso's work, for she tirelessly visited all the avant-garde exhibitions, even the smallest."

Paula scanned the world through the telescope of self-improvement—one is tempted to say through the wrong end. Diminutive knock-offs of other people's ideas—Vuillard's, Cézanne's, Gauguin's, to name but a few—rapidly succeed one another only to be chucked into the closet of her repertoire. To behold this process is to become gradually convinced that "personal growth," rather than the world's beauty, was the main subject of her artistic education. For this reason the self-portrait, eventually the portrait as such, was Paula's most natural theme. In the self-portrait series especially, so many ideas are tested, so many get-ups tried on, that we expect net progress toward the selection of a final costume, but this never quite seems to happen. The Paris self-portrait of 1900, the one I described at the beginning, is highly entertaining, but from there on the artist wanders through a maze of pastiches and

conflations without ever getting decisively better. She liked to call herself a "pilgrim," but she seems more a voyager through the wardrobe, bewitched some seven years in search of a missing foulard or suitable hat.

Only a few of these audacious-impertinent portraits were in the Galerie St. Etienne exhibition. For the others one's memory, or Herr Busch's and Christa Murken-Altrogge's volumes, must be consulted. One picture that *was* in the show was the fifteen-inch-high *Self-Portrait with Necklace*, executed in 1902, two years after the Paris picture. It seems the likeness of someone only distantly related to the earlier Paula, perhaps a cousin of the woman depicted in the Paris self-portrait, and is psychologically much less interesting. The frontal placement of the motif in the narrow vertical format reflects the influence of the Coptic "mummy portraits" of al-Fayyum, a Hellenistic site first excavated in 1888. Oddest here is the way the whole surface has been scored with the brush handle. "She loved *das Krause in sich*," writes Herr Busch of this painting, alluding to a pet phrase of the artist's that is translated in the new edition of her letters as "the roughened intricacy of things." This fondness for whatever is peeling, raddled, excavated-looking, or "distressed," is often mentioned as an original facet of Paula's sensibility; but despite the bamboozling German phrase I question that the impulse differs essentially from the junk-hunter's love of the picturesquely worn, or, for that matter, from the Edwardian coquette's desire to have the bodice panel of her new Worth gown "made over" with ancient fabrics. Relying on such mannerisms to give a picture charm or consistency seems the habit of an amateur, however inspired. One also suspects that the paint film has been worried merely out of dissatisfaction with its value or color—that the artist couldn't get what she wanted more candidly.

In the *Self-Portrait Before a Background with Irises* of 1905-06, the narrow format and the frontal angle are abandoned at considerable cost. The Paris portrait was kooky and cheeky and intimate; this is merely

dingy, a three-quarters view whose sheepish, woolly brushstrokes weave an unpleasant yellow-green color through far too much of the image. Paula found it hard to keep on inventing colors for a picture, and I wonder if that wasn't one reason she painted so small: a big canvas will swallow anyone who can't constantly pull new colors out of a hat. As a whole the smallness of these paintings is out of proportion to their turbid surfaces. The effect, at times, is that of a cyclone boring on the head of a pin. This can create a lapidary beauty, more often an icon of frustration.

The artist's fondness for mannerism and masquerade came to a head in 1907, the year of her sudden death. Still under the influence of the Fayyum mummy portraits, she emerged from her changing room as the olive-skinned priestess of some Hellenistic mystery cult, a sort of Madame Blavatsky of the Nile. Few artists have tried so hard to give us the hebee-jebees, and none with such amiable looniness. The holy silliness of it all, by now greatly intensified, reminds me of old Egyptian movies with their gorgeous warbling mummies. One of these late paintings, the *Self-Portrait with Camelia Branch* of 1906-7, displays the artist's upper body on a narrow vertical panel like a mummy panel. She is holding a frond in a benedictory gesture. Her complexion is more *café* than *lait*, and the whites of her eyes glimmer "mysteriously." According to Herr Busch this is Paula's best-loved and most-reproduced work in Germany, but I find it disconcertingly similar to those old ads, often tall in format, showing a blackamoor houri in bouffant pants offering, above a pidgin sales pitch, a cup of coffee or a bunch of dates. It's really a hokey "brown sauce" painting—one that depends on the harmonizing properties of the umbers—with all the "expression" consigned to the face. What I take to be Paula's last essay in this genre, the *Self-Portrait with Lemon* of 1907, which the Galerie St. Etienne put on the cover of the exhibition catalogue, is much less ceremonial and giggly, much lower church, than the camelia-branch picture. The format is tall again, and

the face is of the mummy type, but the head turns slightly, and the eyes look away, and the lips part to say something sibylline. But the figure wouldn't want to convert you, wouldn't want to sell you the Doctrine of the Single Nature, and one reason is that the benedictory hand now holds not a frond but a lemon. It seems to belong to a woman about to be gnostic only about fish or oysters, a "din-din"-loving sort. She is a totem about to come to life, a Galatea with a growling stomach. Grail-like, the hand with the lemon rises out of the bottom of the canvas, unattached to anything, startling as an apparition, and drawn in a way that reminds you of Matisse yet suits the rest of the picture. You might quibble over some of the colors here but still it's a nice performance.

Of Paula's other self-portraits, all special in some way, the most disquieting is the *Self-Portrait with Amber Necklace*, which the scholars tell us was done about the same time as the lemon painting. In both cases the artist wears the same amber necklace—she ascribed a mystical value to necklaces—though here she holds not a lemon but flowers in both hands. These hands are like palm fronds—in fact I believe Rilke was referring to this painting when, in his "Requiem to a Friend," he described "the contours of your body like the lines of a palm." As he perceived, the artist here *becomes* the fruit that she elsewhere depicts, or offers, or ritualistically uses: she stands with bare breasts, head winsomely tilted before a perfunctory hedge. One might note that Paula was pregnant when she made this, or was probably thinking of getting pregnant. I'm bothered by the stucco-like quality of this painting, and by the artless way the figure was slammed down in the middle of the canvas with no concern for compositional values, though doubtless they're part of the barbaric, dare-all impulse behind this particular effort. What's really dismaying here though is that Paula has once again retreated behind somebody else's sensibility. Clearly she looked the Gauguins off the walls at the great Salon d'Automne retrospective of 1906. Her enthusiasts commonly say that she made Gauguin's (or

Cottet's, or Van Gogh's or Denis's) style into "something very much her own," though I disagree, unless by "her own" is meant "similar, only not as good." That she could, by this time, see in an individual way, yet still caught at the spectacles of almost any arriving avant-gardist is only half the problem. What's even more disturbing is the way she picked up Gauguin's ideas. The *Self-Portrait with Lemon* was an "orientalizing" but also a formally original regurgitation of some newly discovered mummy art. There Paula pictured herself as an active officiant in some nameless and rather jolly-seeming Eastern cult. But in the *Self-Portrait with Amber Necklace* she turned into one of Gauguin's passively seductive odalisques—a *wahine* who's taken up painting. This is woman as comestible, the passive content echoing the imitative manner.

It was precisely this strain of passivity in Paula that nettled Rilke. Liking her, he identified with her, especially with those of her faults that reminded him of his own. Her marriage he rather unreasonably saw as a sort of martyrdom, a failure of the artist-nerve. Yet when Paula reproached Clara for yielding too much of herself to wedlock, it was Rilke, not Clara, who replied, in a prose thickly braided with rationalizations.

The Rilkes had married in 1901, and—apparently to conceal their poverty—moved away from the Worpswede colony. Deeply wounded, missing Clara, Paula wrote murderously in her diary: "I put a wreath on the grave of the woman he once called his love." She even quoted scripture at Rilke behind his back, saying:

Let [Rilke's] way of speaking [about art] be a simple "Yea, yea" or "Nay, nay." He knows nothing about that. These precautions, this anxiety of his about spoiling things with anybody who could possibly be useful later in life! . . . There is a lot of talk and beautiful sentences, but the nut is hollow at its core. Un-German . . . In my estimation Rilke is gradually diminishing to a rather tiny flame which wants to brighten its light through

association with the radiance of the great spirits of Europe—Tolstoy, . . . the Worpsweders, Rodin, Zuolaga . . .

Such feelings are a far cry from the sweet dreams of their earlier friendship, yet there had always been something self-regarding, something smarmy about her letters to him. They had been rank with lyrical yet insincere effusions of an idealistic and somehow recognizably German sort, designed mostly to reveal the writer's cleverness and "nobility." Now the enzymes of resentment were hard at work and the great affection was spoiling.

Paula did not go on to pursue the career of a Nietzschean super-girl: in the end she simply resolved herself to continuing her marriage to Otto. Shortly after bearing him a child, she died of a cardiac embolism. Much of her early fame was a result of the poem that Rilke wrote in her memory, but that poem, his only requiem not to name the one lamented, was not especially warm. We may perform a funerary rite in someone's honor because we long for the person, but we may also do so simply because we long for the ritual itself, and Rilke longed for rituals. The somewhat cool rhetoric of the "Requiem" does not however prevent the personal note from sounding, as in the following lines (translated by Lily Engler and Adrienne Rich):

And last of all you saw yourself like fruit,
peeled yourself out of your clothes, carried
yourself to the mirror, entered into it.
Only your looking stayed outside, large,
and did not say: This is me; but: This is.
And by the end your look was neither
curious nor possessive, and of such pure poverty
it finally wanted to possess
not even yourself: holy.

I want to recall you so, as you placed yourself
in the mirror, deep into it,
away from everything. [. . .]

Let us grieve together that you were taken
out of your mirror. [. . .]

You were about to change
 your every juice into a strong being
 that rises, circles, balanced and unseeing.
 And just then chance, your final accident,
 pulled you back from your furthest
 transformation,
 back into a world where juices *reign*.

Here the poet seems implicitly to deny that Paula had yet grown into "a strong being"; shortly before her death, in fact, he had furnished her with a letter of introduction to Rodin kindly describing her as "the wife of a distinguished painter." But that wasn't at all what he said ten years after her death, in 1916, when Frau Becker sent him a bundle of Paula's diaries and letters with a note asking him to secure their publication. "Deeply as my feelings were touched," he wrote back, "and much as I felt myself to be a participant, even the first reading that evening made [me] realize that the editing (and publication) of those papers would be wrong, if for no other reason than that the picture of Paula Modersohn to which they contribute would inevitably be an indescribably inferior image to the one she ultimately attained in her final years and in the great beauty of her departure from us. Much of what was unique about her would, of course, be conveyed, but not she herself—only what was ready and waiting in her. But not her freedom, not her great productive heart, nothing of the rapid, sudden ascent which is revealed and remains presented in the final stages of her art." These words suggest that Rilke was consoling Frau Becker by reassuring her that Paula had come into her own before her death. He went on edgily to develop his thought, balancing his positive and negative feelings: "Concerned, indeed worried about being charming and gracious . . . in the face of the frequently coarse conditions of her life, Paula caused a certain compromising nature to . . . activate her responses. In the ultimate and absolute sense, most of what she wrote is not truthful; rather it is adapted to a way of living in which agreeableness and graciousness were the decisive qualities It is in her work, the work of that ultimate,

abundant year, that she attained the fulfillment which in the end decisively wins us over to her." It is hard to accept the sincerity of Rilke's judgment of Paula's last work, especially in that some years later—in 1924—Rilke would write one Hermann Pongs: "Paula Modersohn I last saw in Paris in 1906 and knew little of her works of that time or her latest, with which I am even now not acquainted."

It is ironic that the uneasy compromise of propriety and truth that Rilke attributed to Paula stands out so clearly in his own words. The line between praise and humbug is a fuzzy one that the great writer, like the rest of us, had difficulty drawing. Though his affection for Paula had evidently grown rather strained—he was trying to overcome his wounded vanity, and he also identified uneasily with her feminine predicament—he wanted to appreciate her, and he did. Besides, her early death had shocked him into a deeper awareness of mortality and so sanctified her memory. What's curious is that his eulogistic tone should have been retained to our day in so much of what is said about her by people who never knew her. In praising her, Rilke wished also to bury her, and her writings with her. Small wonder then that their re-publication in a new and probably definitive volume of her letters and journals should raise all the doubts implicitly posed by Rilke's refusal to have a hand in editing them. The question of the eulogizing tone and its putative springs—reverence for the dead, sentimentality about women, "nostalgia" for pre-1914 German culture—is the least of these problems. More important is that Paula's role as a go-between was a dubious one. There was something painfully parochial in her spotting and mimicking foreign ideas and importing them into her own country, especially since those ideas had already gained a certain currency where they'd started and she didn't greatly alter or improve them. This issue is complicated by the relative weakness of the German Expressionist art that her own art is supposed to have pre-saged. Most of that art is so overrated any-

way that it is hard to see why her historical role is so important. As for Paula's way of writing about art, I suspect that Rilke (himself responsible for many a dreary page on Rodin and Cézanne) didn't especially care for it. That the new edition, which contains much material he never saw, would likely change his opinion we may doubt. Not that she doesn't emerge as a much franker being than the one whose letters and journals were eventually published (without his help) in 1917. She does, but the problem lies elsewhere. These writings reveal so much about somebody so young and as yet so incapable of psychological perspicacity about art or people that the reader, in the absence of any genuine entertainment, inevitably ends up passing judgment on her. In fact the publication of such a book is a singular invitation to a trial of this sort, a trial *in absentia* where the accused, being dead, cannot defend herself with what must have been a rare personal charm. How much, we may ask in the end, were these letters actually *meant*? It is commonly assumed that a dead person's correspondence will tell us what he or she was "really like"; but no one would ever make this assumption about someone still alive. Letters, which can seem the very blood of the dear departed—like St. January's boiling in its phial—are rightly read as offering only the most tenuous clues to the nature of a living being. Nowhere as in letters can people so easily lie. If Paula seems—as she does to me—to posture mercilessly in her corre-

spondence, that does not mean she was a *poseuse*. She may merely have used her letters to sport the garb of a more intriguing self, a garb worth trying on perhaps but probably cast off at unguarded moments. The suspicion that the letters provide merely one element, one weight, in a broader equivocation is confirmed by her habit of swinging back and forth between humility and grandiloquence, righteousness and spite, self-worship and the adoration of nature.

Paula's letters are often too pinched and mean-spirited to seem like freely given gifts. Now and then the reader can't help but wonder why what was once accorded so begrudgingly to kith and kin has now been offered so unstintingly to the world. These days Paula is coming to us largely in the interpretation of Günter Busch, who writes clearly and intelligently, but whose way of analysing Paula's rather minor pictures in much the same terms usually reserved for far greater masters can sometimes sound a bit comical. A cozy, gentlemanly affability, a refusal to see into the shabbiness of much of this artist's production and aesthetic persona seems to be obstructing his judgment. In this Herr Busch is not alone: too often her admirers fail to see what is obvious—that her art is derivative, and that her writings are marred by a tiresome egomania. Granted, she died very young. But to inflate her reputation is also to ask too much of her. It is unfair to the poor shade of Paula Modersohn-Becker.

Walter Pater and Bernard Berenson

by Paul Barolsky

When the aged connoisseur, art critic, historian, and man of letters Bernard Berenson took up Walter Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* during World War II, it was to re-read the novel for the eighth time. As Berenson said in his *Sketch for a Self-Portrait*, written in these years and published in 1949: "The genius who revealed to me what from childhood I had been instinctively tending toward was Walter Pater in his *Marius*, his *Imaginary Portraits*, his *Emerald Uthwart*, his *Demeter*. It is for that I have loved him since youth and shall be grateful to him even to the House of Hades, where, in the words of Nausicaa to Odysseus, 'I shall hail him as a god.'" As a young man Berenson had observed that "art teaches us not only what to see, but what to be," and from Pater's art Berenson learned to be an Edwardian *Marius*. He shared with *Marius* a native "capacity of the eye," a "love of beauty"; and, aspiring to *Marius*'s "visionary idealism of the villa," he eventually re-created this ideal world at his Villa I Tatti.

Berenson might well have added another book to the list of Pater's works that he mentions in his *Sketch for a Self-Portrait*. He wrote from Europe in 1888 to his patroness Mrs. Gardner, "Many a midnight, in coming home, I took up the *Renaissance* and read it from cover to cover." First published in 1873, Pater's book was reprinted, with many revisions, through the end of the century. It was one of the principal texts to nurture the young Berenson who, as a college

student in the 1880s, published poetry, short stories, and criticism in *The Harvard Monthly* and hoped to pursue a career as an imaginative writer. Yet even after he abandoned these literary ambitions to become a connoisseur and historian of Italian Renaissance art, the lessons of Pater's prose, insights, and way of thinking were to penetrate deeply into his writings on art.

The last edition of *The Renaissance* to appear during Pater's lifetime was printed in 1893. By that time Berenson had become an expert in Italian Renaissance art, and in 1894, the year of Pater's death, Berenson, not yet thirty years of age, published the first of his four little books on Italian painting, *The Venetian Painters*. This volume was followed by *The Florentine Painters* of 1896, *The Central Italian Painters* of 1897, and then, a decade later, by *The North Italian Painters*. These four slim volumes, the "Gospels," as Berenson later ironically called them, were subsequently collected in 1930 as *The Italian Painters of the Renaissance*, a book which has come to be regarded as a classic in the study of Italian Renaissance art.

In recent years Berenson has been the topic of much discussion. Ernest Samuel's *Bernard Berenson: The Making of a Connoisseur*, which appeared in 1979, vividly documents Berenson's youth in Boston and education at Harvard, tracing his move to Italy and rapid ascent there as a prodigious scholar of Italian painting. The following year

appeared Meryle Secrest's polemical *Being Bernard Berenson*, which focuses on the controversial aspects of Berenson's life—his financial ambitions, sexual relations, and religious motives. Since then, numerous reviews and essays on Berenson have been published. Although his books are referred to and sometimes summarized in these writings, emphasis has been placed on his alluring persona—the sage of I Tatti who presided over the extraordinary salon of his villa at Vincigliata in the hills outside of Florence for more than half a century. The man has become more important than his work, and even his former protégé, Kenneth Clark, who dedicated a fine chapter of his new *Moments of Vision* to “The Work of Bernard Berenson,” writes only a few pages on *The Italian Painters*.

The recent interest in Berenson coincides with an outpouring of books and essays on Pater.¹ Although Pater's influence on Berenson has always been observed, the degree to which Berenson absorbed Pater's aesthetics and specific judgments has not been fully appreciated. Kenneth Clark, who has pub-

lished an edition of *The Renaissance*, and who himself upholds the tradition of Berenson and Pater in modern scholarship, does not even mention Pater in his essay on Berenson.

There are of course fundamental differences between Berenson and Pater. Whereas Pater is now generally regarded as one of the greatest prose stylists in the history of English literature and *The Renaissance* looked upon as a classic of prose, “the passages in Berenson's work which are likely to retain their value,” as Clark observes, “are few and short.” We continue to adhere to many of Berenson's critical judgments, but “they often seem to us,” Clark adds, “imperfectly expressed.” Pater's book is itself a highly sophisticated work of literary art, a sustained prose poem; Berenson's books are conventional essays. Moreover, the subject of *The Renaissance* is different from that of *The Italian Painters*. Pater deals with both literature and art, Berenson focuses more narrowly on painting. Finally, there is a basic difference of objectives that separates the two authors. For Pater one of the fundamental goals of criticism is to describe or re-create aesthetic experiences: “What is this song or picture to me, this engaging personality presented in life or in a book to *me*? What effect does it really produce on me? Does it give me pleasure? and if so, what sort or degree of pleasure?” Berenson is still alive to these questions: “. . . what is it then that makes Sandro Botticelli so irresistible that nowadays we may have no alternative, but to worship or abhor him?” But Berenson does not merely seek to describe the impression of art; rather, he attempts to identify exactly and precisely the formal properties of painting that account for our impression of it. Just as Berenson's connoisseurship, based on the scientific principles of Giovanni Morelli, enabled him to attribute paintings to artists on the basis of their exact morphology, so too his criticism of these works depended on a close analysis of the essential characteristics of form. Thus, whereas Berenson admired Pater's epithets for “their accuracy and rarity,” he deplored his “lack

1 Whereas the discussions of Berenson center on the cult or anti-cult of his personality, the bulk of the literature on the reclusive Pater is far more specialized, focusing on the character of his writings. The best general introduction to Pater's literary career and to the qualities of his work is Gerald Monsman's *Walter Pater*, Twayne, 1977. Michael Levey's more widely known biography, *The Case of Walter Pater* (Thames and Hudson, 1978), is surprisingly unsympathetic to its subject and unappreciative of Pater's accomplishment. The interested reader will want to consult Donald L. Hill's new edition of *The Renaissance* (University of California, 1980), useful for its detailed commentary on Pater's sources.

In *Moments of Vision* (Harper & Row, 1981), Kenneth Clark touches on Pater's contribution to the literature of art. Pater's influence on twentieth-century interpretations of the visual arts is, however, a subject that warrants further pondering. I have made some brief, preliminary remarks on Pater's interpretations of Renaissance art in “Walter Pater's Renaissance,” *Virginia Quarterly Review* (Spring, 1982), 208-220.

of exact connoisseurship," for instance, Pater's discussion of works that had been mis-attributed (the *Medusa* wrongly assigned to Leonardo da Vinci being a prime example). One finds marginal notes in Berenson's copy of *The Renaissance* in the library at I Tatti, largely in the hand of his wife Mary Logan but reflecting Berenson's own judgments, that object to the many erroneous attributions uncritically accepted by Pater.

Despite these basic distinctions between Berenson and Pater, the connections between *The Italian Painters* and *The Renaissance* are deeper and more subtle than has generally been supposed. If Berenson's writing is not "literature" as such, we should recognize its literary ambitions and the association of its critical accomplishment to Pater's writing; and if Pater's book is far more than "art history," we might well consider the value of his critical judgments of art both for Berenson and for subsequent criticism. To examine their writings together is to see the extent to which their shared understanding of the Renaissance reflected the values of nineteenth-century art and literature and came to shape our approach to modernist art.

For both Pater and Berenson, Goethe is the hero of modern culture. In the nineteenth-century world, where the unity of culture was seemingly "a lost art," Goethe continued to uphold "the identity of European culture" against the multiple currents of modern thought. When Jacob Burckhardt published *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* in 1860, he followed the example of Goethe, aspiring to the ideal of cultural unity and wholeness exemplified in the Renaissance state as a work of art, embodied in the Renaissance man as *uomo universale*. Like Burckhardt, Pater and Berenson aspire to an ideal of cultural wholeness, or what Pater calls *Allgemeinheit*. Allusions to *Faust* abound in Pater's book, especially in the essay on Leonardo, whose "curiosity" and "larger vision" are Faustian. Berenson similarly extols the Faustian ideal in Michelangelo's art, where we behold "the creation

of the type of man best fitted to subdue and control the earth, and who knows!, perhaps more than the earth." The very emergence of the modern historical definition of Renaissance culture in the writings of Burckhardt, Pater, and Berenson is rooted in Goethe's quest for a universal culture.

In *The Renaissance*, Pater outlines the "identity" of European culture, building in his "literary architecture" a "*House Beautiful*" from the classical and biblical traditions and their fusion in the *Allgemeinheit* of modern French, English, Italian, and German culture. The subject of his book is ostensibly the art and literature of the Renaissance, but he in fact ranges over cultural history from Homer and Plato to Blake, Goethe, and Baudelaire. In like fashion, Berenson discusses the Italian Renaissance painters in relation to the classics, alluding to Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Aristotle, Theocritus, Virgil, the *Nibelungen*, the *Eddas*, the *Roman de la Rose*, Boccaccio, Shakespeare, Calderon, Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, and Tolstoy. In Pater there is a more unifying typology at work. For example, Plato is defined as a central type of western culture, and Abelard, Pico, Botticelli, Della Robbia, Leonardo, Giorgione, Winckelmann, and Goethe are all discussed, either explicitly or indirectly, in relation to Platonism, which, as Pater later observed in *Plato and Platonism* (1893), "is not a formal theory or body of theories, but a tendency or group of tendencies." Pater's *The Renaissance* is permeated by an abiding concern with this Platonic "tendency" of vision toward "pure form," and is, along with Pater's other writings, one of the last sustained expressions of Platonism in the western tradition. Berenson's book, although dependent on Arnold's discussion of "Hebraism" and "Hellenism," is not so stringently organized in typological terms.

Just as Berenson follows Pater in aspiring toward a universal culture, he follows Pater in writing in an implicitly autobiographical way about his artistic heroes. It is a commonplace of literary scholarship that Pater assumes the identity of all of his literary

idols from Plato to Goethe. Like Botticelli, he is a "visionary"; with Della Robbia he attempts to "etherealize form"; like Michelangelo, he is "preoccupied with death." Pico's aspiration to a "spirit of order and beauty in knowledge" is Pater's, as is Leonardo's quest for "correspondences." The "music" of Giorgione and Du Bellay is that to which Pater himself aspires, and Winckelmann's and Goethe's ideal of "Hellenism" is also Pater's. Although not to the same degree or as consistently, Berenson too becomes his own subjects. The refinement of Pisanello's art and the "courtier's way of life" that it embodies reflect Berenson's ideals, as do the noble figures of Mantegna, who appear "as if they had never been anything but marble, never other than statuesque in pose, processional in gait, and god-like in gesture." If we look at the widely reproduced photographic portrait of Berenson, taken at I Tatti in 1903 and picturing an elegant, courtly, and statuesque young man suavely posed beneath the *Madonna* by Domenico Veneziano, we see how the critic has passed through the looking glass of Italian painting into a world of confident aristocratic elegance of his own. He has also entered into the world of Pater's fiction, appearing in the photograph as a modern Marius.

The Renaissance is a highly poetical book. Yeats transcribed its most famous passage, that on the *Mona Lisa*, into poetry, printing it as free verse in his Oxford book of modern verse; Harold Bloom has spoken of the whole book as a "prose poem"; and I have previously examined the book, its form and imagery, as "the poetry of nothingness." Students of literature have always recognized the extent of poetical influence on Pater's writings, the reflections in it of Keats, Wordsworth, and Shelley, of Rossetti, Browning, and Swinburne, and of Hugo, Gautier, and Baudelaire. Though less poetical than Pater's, Berenson's prose is similarly steeped in poetry, and at times it is poetical in its ambition to re-create the effects of paintings. The first lines of Gray's "Elegy" capture for Berenson the subduing

effects of coolness and opalescent grey in Verrocchio's landscapes, and Ercole Roberti's Herod is described with a phrase from Shelley's "Ozymandias": "If ever man had 'wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command,' it is Herod." A line from Keats's "On the Grasshopper and the Cricket" expresses the theme of Signorelli's *Pan*: "The Poetry of Earth is never Dead." And Berenson's own evocative description of Pan, who "sits in hushed solemnity of the sunset," echoes the melancholic Keatsean Pan of "Endymion," "who through whole solemn hours doth sit, and hearken the dreary melody of bedded reeds."

Sometimes this poetical language is fully assimilated into Berenson's prose, as in his evocation of Perugino: "How refreshingly quiet are his Crucifixions and Entombments! The still air is soundless, and people wail no more; a sigh inaudible, a look of yearning and that is all." Berenson's immediate source of inspiration is Pater's own musical "poetry" on the silences in Giorgione, but the passage also suggests the melancholy of Rossetti's sonnet on Giorgione and, ultimately, the silent pastoral of Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn." Berenson's uses of poetry are also not always apparent. Discussing Andrea del Sarto, he teases the painter for depicting his figures like so many "clothes-horses" who dare not move "for fear of disturbing their too obviously arranged folds," who "have nothing better to do than show off draperies." Enjoying Berenson's implicit pun on Sarto's "sartorial" obsession, we might fail to recognize that his facetious tone is a transposition from Browning's poem of 1855, "Andrea del Sarto," in which the pathos of the painter is brought out in combination with just such mockery. For example, Browning has the pathetic artist offer his wife money for clothes: "Beside, What's better and what's all I care about, Get you the thirteen scudi for the ruff. Love, does that please you?"

In *Moments of Vision*, Kenneth Clark speaks of "art criticism and history as literature," echoing Oscar Wilde, who described criticism as art, and Walter Pater, who rendered

it so. Clark observes that this kind of criticism is rare even in the prose of the finest critics. The most famous examples in Pater are his evocations of Giorgione's "idylls" and of Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*. Less familiar is Berenson's re-creation of the paintings by the gifted Ferrarese painter, Cosimo Tura:

His figures are of flint, as haughty and immobile as Pharaohs, or as convulsed with suppressed energy as the gnarled knots in the olive tree. Their faces are seldom lit up with tenderness, and their smiles are apt to run into archaic grimaces. Their claw-like hands express the manner of their contact. Tura's architecture is piled up and baroque, not as architecture frequently is in painters of the earlier Renaissance, but almost as in the proud palaces built for the Medes and Persians. His landscapes are of a world which has these many ages seen no flower or green leaf, for there is no earth, no mould, no sod, only the inhospitable rock everywhere. He seldom finds place even for the dry cornel tree which other artists, trained at Padua, loved to paint.

There is a perfect harmony in all this. His rock-born men could not fitly inhabit a world less crystal-hard, and would be out of place among architectural forms less burdensomely massive. Being of adamant, they must take such shapes as that substance will permit, of things either petrified, or contorted with the effort at articulation. And where the effort at movement produces such results, expression must freeze into grimace before it has reached its conclusion.

Where there is harmony there is necessarily purpose, and Tura's purpose is clear. It is to realize substance with almost maniac ferocity. He will have nothing in his world which will not firmly resist his conquering embrace. Nothing soft, nothing yielding, nothing vague. His world is an anvil, his perception is a hammer, and nothing must muffle the sound of the stroke. Naught more tender than flint and adamant could furnish the material for such an artist.

We again find that Berenson's description depends on poetry, in this case a poem on

Tura by Katherine Bradley and her niece, Edith Cooper (both followers of Pater and friends of Berenson), who wrote together under the pseudonym Michael Field. In his copy of their *Sight and Song* of 1892, still at I Tatti, Berenson marked lines that contributed to his own poetical diction:

A foot that rather seems to be
The clawed base of pillar past all date
Than prop of flesh and bone.

Grey are the hollowed rocks, grey is his head
And grey his beard, that formal and as dread
As some Assyrian's on a monument
From the chin is sloping down.

Berenson does not literally imitate the poem, but the description of Saint Jerome's clawed foot as a fragment of statuary and the picturing of his bleak rocky setting kindled the critic's poetical imaginings, which were indeed appropriate to the exotic forms of that most fantastical of painters. Berenson's evocative, poetically inspired writing on Tura is not of the same order as Pater's prose poetry, but it has exerted a powerful influence on twentieth-century interpretations of the Ferrarese school, helping to shape, for example, the appreciation of its strange, highly imaginative forms in Roberto Longhi's *Officina Ferrarese* (1932), one of the great studies of Renaissance art of our century.

In *The Renaissance* Walter Pater makes sustained references to Wordsworth, to the poet's idealization of childhood and feeling for nature, both of which underlie Pater's appreciation of Renaissance art and literature, especially those "exquisite pauses" of Giorgione. Berenson similarly invokes the Romantic poet, associating Piero della Francesca's heroic attitude toward landscape with Wordsworth's grand vision of nature. Nineteenth-century writers had not neglected Piero. But it was Berenson who first saw the extent of his accomplishment, characterizing him as one of the greatest artists of the Quattrocento. He thus determined our present appreciation of the painter, still reflected

in the classic monographs of our day by Longhi and Kenneth Clark.

Although Berenson's aesthetic theories are not so consistently developed as Pater's, his interpretation of Piero, influenced decisively by Pater, suggests a unified vision of art and is the core of his own critical position. The art that does not represent Piero's own feelings is an art of "impersonality," an ideal epitomized in the *Flagellation of Christ*, where none of the dramatis personae respond to the horror; the foreground figures especially are "as unconcerned as the everlasting rocks." As Berenson observes, Piero loved impersonality, "the absence of expressed emotion, as a quality in things." In the art of the "impassive" Piero, "grand figures" are combined with landscapes of "severity and dignity"; and the "utmost power" of this work depends on the fact that in it "all special emotion is disregarded."

The roots of Berenson's theory of impersonality are to be found in the eighteenth-century Neo-classicism of Winckelmann and Lessing, both of whom praised Hellenic art for its repose and harmony, for its lack of overt expression. Their point of view informs the thinking of Goethe, who once remarked to Herder "that the ancients represented existences, we usually represent the effect." Goethe's classical ideal subsequently influenced Burckhardt, who in *Der Cicerone* characterized Bellini's S. Giobbe altarpiece as an *Existenzbild*, a harmonious union of emotionless figures "in a blessed state of existence." In his book on Piero published in 1954, near the end of his life, Berenson invoked Burckhardt's formulation as one of the foundations of his own survey of the history of impersonality in art. We should also observe that the background to Berenson's notion of impersonality is extensive. In Hazlitt's "On Gusto" we find an appreciation of Greek art reminiscent of Goethe's: "It seems enough for them *to be* without acting or suffering." In French Parnassian poetry of *l'impassivité* we recognize a similar ideal, prefiguring Berenson's—for example, Leconte de Lisle's "Vénus de Milo," in

which the statue is prized for its "impassive happiness," a "serenity" and "calm" like that of the sea.

The very fabric of Neo-classicism, woven from the threads of modern French, German, and English tradition into Berenson's work, had already been artistically rendered in the writings of Pater. *The Renaissance* itself is a work of impersonal art in which Pater presents his own view of life impersonally, through his Renaissance subjects. It is, however, only in Pater's essay "Style" in *Appreciations* (1889) and in the last pages of Pater's essay "Prosper Mérimée" (*Miscellaneous Studies*, 1895) that Berenson would have found the explicit formulation of the theory of impersonality. Speaking of impersonality in literary art, Pater describes an art of "self-effacement"—an art "impersonal in its beauty, the perfection of nobody's style." Pater quotes Flaubert's goal in art: "'It has always been my rule to put nothing of myself into my works,'" adding that Flaubert was "*disinterested* in his literary creations, so to speak." The word "disinterested" immediately brings to mind the criticism of Matthew Arnold; but it also suggests Kant's concept of "disinterestedness," and in fact we find that at the beginning of his essay Pater announces that "Kant's criticism of the mind" is the context in which he intends to discuss Mérimée.

Using Pater's definition of impersonality, Berenson sketches the history of impersonal art, referring to the Parthenon frieze, which Pater had called "the highest expression of indifference," and invoking the impersonal work of Velázquez. In the art of the Renaissance he observes numerous examples of impersonality. Perugino's figures are "impersonal as architecture," Raphael's are "impassive"; Cossa's work is marked by "haughtiness," Roberti's by an "absence of sensibility." He also identifies a "magical aloofness" in Melozzo da Forlì's painting that he associates with the poetry of Aeschylus and Keats on the "fallen dynasties of gods." He observes that Melozzo's music-making angels, although abandoned to feeling, are "unconscious of others, or even of

self” and are thus “impersonal,” as is Calvé in *Carmen*. Again, we are made to think of Pater, who pointed out that Mérimée’s *Carmen* exemplifies impersonality. Elaborating on Pater’s brief remarks, Berenson thus outlines a history of impersonality from Phidias and Aeschylus through the Renaissance to Wordsworth and Keats.

In his classic essay of 1919, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” T. S. Eliot, who reacted against the biographical approach to literature of nineteenth-century criticism, observed: “the poet has, not a ‘personality’ to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impression and experience combine in peculiar and unexpected ways. Impressions and experiences which are important for the man may take no place in the poetry, and those which become important in the poetry may play quite a negligible part in the man, the personality.” We can now see that Eliot’s “meaning” depends on the notion of “impersonality” articulated in the 1880s and 1890s by Pater and Berenson. In more recent criticism Clement Greenberg, who was deeply influenced by Eliot, has criticized the theatrical or “literalist” tendency in modern art, and he has been followed by his former protégé, Michael Fried, also a close reader of Eliot, who in “Art and Objecthood” (*Artforum*, 1967) called for an art that is a “presence,” art that is not theatrically expressive or gestural. Such criticism harks back indirectly through Eliot to the aesthetics of Winckelmann and Lessing. But it can also be observed that just as Berenson’s and Pater’s writings on impersonality link twentieth-century art and literary criticism to the tradition of nineteenth-century aesthetics, so does their work occupy a pivotal intermediary position linking recent “formalist” criticism to the aesthetics of eighteenth-century Neo-classicism.

If Berenson’s criticism of Piero has had a strong effect on modern criticism, so too has his writing on Botticelli. Pater was the first critic to focus on the sadness or “ineffable melancholy” of Botticelli’s works, but transcending Pater’s impressionism, Berenson

identifies the painter’s “line” as the essential formal characteristic of his art: “This kind of line, then, being the quintessence of movement, has, like the essential elements in all the arts, a power of stimulating our imagination and of directly communicating life.” Describing the “rhythm” of Botticelli’s line, he calls his art a “linear symphony” in which “tactile values were translated into values of movement.” Botticelli was, in short, “the greatest artist of linear design that Europe has ever known”; he “may have had rivals in Japan and elsewhere in the East, but in Europe never.”

There are numerous aesthetic forces that shaped Berenson’s criticism of Botticelli. His vision of line was determined, as he himself implies, by Japanese painting; and he was surely stimulated to appreciate the rhythmic effects of Botticelli’s art by Pre-Raphaelite painting, especially the animated calligraphy of Burne-Jones. The rhythms of both Japanese art and Pre-Raphaelite painting were felt in the Art Nouveau of the 1890s, for example, in the cursive drawings of Aubrey Beardsley, who made illustrations for Oscar Wilde’s *Salomé*. We could say that Berenson’s “discovery” of the sheer buoyancy of Botticelli’s draftsmanship, influenced by the Art Nouveau, is itself a critical outgrowth of this style.

But how did Berenson come to write about Botticelli as he did? It is likely that when he speaks of *The Birth of Venus*, in which he “feels the force and freshness of the wind in the life of the wave,” he recalls once again the poetical imagery of his friends, the Michael Fields, who wrote about the painting in *Sight and Song*:

Frills of brimming wavelets lap
Round a shell that is a boat;
Roses fly like birds and float
Down the crisp air; garments flap;
Midmost of the breeze, with locks
In possession of the wind,
Coiling hair in loosened shocks,
Sways a girl who seeks to bind
New-born beauty with a tress
Gold about her nakedness.

Brimming, lap, fly, float, flap, coiling, sways—with this vocabulary the Fields had already brought out the movement of Botticelli that Berenson was to focus on a short time later. Berenson's description of Botticelli's "rhythm" or "music" of line might also be based on John Addington Symonds's way of describing the "melodies of line" in Mantegna's Hampton Court frieze. But finally, it must have been in *The Renaissance* that Berenson found his point of departure, for when he speaks of the "abstract" idea in Botticelli, the "pure values of movement abstracted," the "unembodied values of touch and movement," he is using the vocabulary of Pater's book, which throughout is about the "way of etherealizing pure form." Pater speaks of the "abstract lines" of the faces in Botticelli's art, having already observed "the charm" in his art "of line and colour, the medium of abstract painting." Pater's repeated usages of "abstract" and "pure" are expressive of his own Platonism, as when he speaks of the "pure thoughts or ideas," the "pure form," and "system of abstraction" of the Hellenic art to which Renaissance art is related.

Pater's own Platonism and Platonic vocabulary were to pave the way to an understanding of the Platonism of Botticelli's art, though it was only in the later exegeses of this century that such Platonic significance in Botticelli was made explicit, some would say too explicit. But just as Pater looked back to antiquity, he also announced a major concern of modernist criticism when he spoke of "abstract painting"—perhaps the earliest such usage. Like Pater, Berenson speaks of Florentine art as "pure art," an art of "pure values"; but, seeking to clarify Pater's perceptions, he puts far more emphasis on "tactile values" or "form" and stresses the "significance" of this form. "It was on form, and form alone," Berenson insists, "that the great Florentine masters concentrated their efforts." Masaccio is "a great master of the significant"; Uccello is "endowed with a great sense of the significant"; Pollaiuolo "*extracts the significance of movements*." The paintings of Fra Angelico, Fi-

lippino Lippi, Domenico Ghirlandaio, and Andrea del Sarto are criticized for their lack of significance. Nowhere is it clearer that Berenson was writing in the language that twentieth-century critics would adapt than in his famous appreciation of Giotto (the italics are added):

Now what is behind this power of raising us to a higher plane of reality, but a genius for grasping and communicating real *significance*? A painter who, after generations of mere manufacturers of symbols, illustrations, and allegories, had the power to render the material *significance* of the objects he painted, must, as a man, have a profound sense of the *significant*. No matter, then, what his theme, Giotto feels its real *significance* . . .

We can now see that Berenson's modification of Pater's criticism was a major step toward the emerging doctrine of "significant form" codified by Clive Bell in 1914 in his widely read book *Art* and developed earlier in the essays collected in *Vision and Design* (1920) by Roger Fry, who speaks of "abstract significance," "pure beauty," and the "purely aesthetic organization of form." Fry's "Essay on Aesthetics" in this volume is an adaptation of Berenson's aesthetics. Berenson had spoken of form, movement, space-composition, and color as part of "decoration"; Fry provides a similar scheme of "design," which includes line, mass, space, light, shadow, and color.

Clement Greenberg observed in *Art and Culture* that "the notion of 'significant form' was very much in the English air around 1914, and I cannot help thinking that this attempt to isolate the essential factor in the experience of visual art had some effect on the young Eliot." We have already seen that the implicit doctrine of significant form was developed by Berenson in the 1890s. We find too that it was embellished by A. C. Bradley as early as his famous Oxford lecture of 1901, "Poetry for Poetry's Sake." Still writing in the tradition of Pater, Bradley discusses what he calls the "expressed meaning" or "significant form"

of poetry. When he also observes that “in painting there is not a meaning *plus* paint, but a meaning *in* paint, or significant paint,” he is speaking, perhaps not coincidentally, in the language of Berenson’s book on the Florentines of five years before. Returning to Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” we find that his famous conclusion could have been written by Berenson himself: “But very few know when there is expression of *significant* emotion, emotion which has its life in the poem and not in the history of the poet. The emotion of art is impersonal. And the poet cannot reach this impersonality without surrendering himself to the work to be done.” Eliot’s famous formulation here is a rephrasing or paraphrasing of the twin doctrines of “impersonality” and “significant form” developed by Berenson from Pater’s criticism.

So much has been made in recent years of Berenson’s aversion to modern art that his role in the development of its criticism has been largely ignored. Insufficient attention has been paid to the fact that his own perceptions of Renaissance painting were determined by contemporary art. Though Pater scarcely alludes to the art of his times, noting only Ingres and Legros, Berenson’s interpretations of Italian painting are made through his experience of nineteenth-century painting. He invokes Millet in his discussion of Roberti’s “atmospheric effect,” associates the “freedom of touch” in Signorelli’s late work with Daumier’s brush work, and compares the “harmonies of tone” in Bergognone’s work to those of “the exquisite American,” Whistler. We sense that when Berenson admires Raphael’s portrait of Castiglione, calling it “that exquisite study in grey,” he is seeing the painting through Whistler’s eyes. It is especially in his experience of the finest painting of the late nineteenth century that Berenson’s sense of form is developed. With a prophetic tone he predicts that a real art of landscape “will come only when some artists modelling skies like Cézanne’s, able to communicate light and heat as Monet does,” also convey a feeling for space like

that of the Umbrians. And his sense of tactile values and movement in the work of Leonardo is heightened by his response to Degas. Berenson’s notion of significant form is thus already concerned implicitly with that painting later championed by Fry in Berenson’s idiom.

Because so much stress has been placed in the writing on Berenson on his celebration of the “life-enhancing” powers of “tactile values,” an important and influential addition to his theory in *The North Italian Painters* has been overlooked. Whereas tactility is one of the essential characteristics of significant form as defined in *The Florentine Painters*, Berenson expanded his definition of form in the later book to embrace a “purely pictorial” art, or what he speaks of as “the plastic-pictorial” as opposed to the tactile or “plastic-linear” of the Florentines. He finds this kind of art in Bellini’s painting, free of line and chiaroscuro, and even more so in the work of the Veronese masters, especially Brusasorci, who achieved a “mode of visualizing” that “still reigns in the world of painting.” Just as Michelangelo was the greatest Renaissance master of tactile values and Degas the leading modern exponent of tactility in art, Paolo Veronese was the finest Cinquecento painter of the “purely pictorial.” Berenson probably thought of Matisse as among the most distinguished painters in this tradition. For in 1908, the year after the publication of *The North Italian Painters*, he wrote a defense of Matisse’s work in *The Nation*. We have since come to see that the art of Matisse is the supreme example of the purely pictorial mode of visualizing in the first years of this century, thanks in part to the critical writings of Clement Greenberg, who in *Art and Culture* wrote in Berenson’s language, stressing “the exclusively two-dimensional, optical, and altogether untactile definitions of experience” in modernist painting.

Berenson’s influences have led us forward in time to Fry, Eliot, and Greenberg, but let us return, finally, to his origins as a writer on art, to *The Venetian Painters* in which he

first articulated the views on color later elaborated upon in *The North Italian Painters*. Berenson's book on the Venetians brings us back, once again, to Walter Pater, that diaphanous presence behind the future course of Anglo-American art criticism. In his essay "The School of Giorgione," Pater speaks of "colouring" in Venetian art, associating it with the "abstract colour" of Japanese fan painting. Reacting to Ruskin's overemphasis on what Berenson would call "illustration" but ever sensitive to Ruskin's own analyses of color, Pater observes, as Ruskin never would have, that "in its primary aspect, a great picture has no more definite message for us than an accidental play of sunlight and shadow for a few moments on the wall or floor." This passage was surely in Berenson's mind when he described Carpaccio's *Dream of St. Ursula* "as the picture of a room with the light playing softly upon its walls, upon the flower-pots in the window, and upon the writing-table and the cupboard." Though, with attention to the painter's artifice, Ruskin had focused instead on the subject of Carpaccio's painting: "It is very pretty of Carpaccio," he wrote in *Fors Clavigera*, "to make her dream out the angel's dream so particularly and notice the slackened sleeves; and to dream so little an angel—very nearly a doll angel—bringing her the branch of palm and message." Following Pater in his reaction to Ruskin's stress on subject matter, Berenson agrees with Pater's judgment that Venetian painters up to Carpaccio and Bellini make painting "a thing for the eye, a space of colour on the wall, only more dexteriously blent than the marking of a precious stone or the chance interchange of sun and shade upon it"—though, perhaps, in his attention to the details of St. Ursula's chamber (the flower-pots, window, writing-desk, and cupboards) Berenson retains just a little of Ruskin's love of particularity. Pater saw the epitome of this abstracting tendency in the art of Giorgione, calling him the "inventor of genre"; but Berenson, now modifying Pater and seeking some independence from him, insists that as a painter of genre Carpaccio "was the earliest master."

Berenson's criticism of Venetian art lies squarely in the French tradition that so informs Pater's *The Renaissance*. His celebration of Bassano's sensuous "jewel-like" paintings, this "art for its own sake," echoes Gautier, and his description of Bassano's "modern versions of biblical stories filled with episodes from the life in the streets of Bassano" recalls Baudelaire's criticism of the painting of modern life. Berenson traces the evolution of modern art from the Venetians to the "best French painters" of his day, from Titian and Bassano to Cézanne: "Indeed, not the least attraction of the Venetian masters is their note of modernity." Bassano "beat out" the path to Velázquez, and the Venetians affected the Spanish painters, who had "an extraordinary influence on modern painting." The Venetian tradition was similarly absorbed by Rubens, then by Reynolds, and was sustained by Guardi, who developed "instantaneous effects" that prefigure Romantic and Impressionist painting. Similarly Tiepolo's work in Spain contributed to the "revival" of painting there under Goya, who in turn influenced "many of the best French artists of our time."

Depending on Pater's sense of Giorgione's modernity and embellishing it, Berenson outlined for the first time the evolution of modern art as we now construe it. His view has become commonplace in the texts of our day, but our familiarity with this historical outline should not diminish our recognition of his highly original formulation. When he later added to this scheme the definition of a "purely pictorial" tradition, Berenson provided a basis for extending this historical overview into the future to include Fauvism and even more recent forms of modernism, notably Abstract Expressionism and Color-field painting.

Berenson's history of art is very much a formal history, and his influence on Fry, Eliot, and Greenberg is reflected in their attitudes toward form. Today, however, we are witnessing a reaction against "formalism" in the study of both art history and literature. Although the reaction to the New

Criticism of literature is now already decades old, the hostility to formalism in the study of art is more recent, having emerged rather sharply in the 1970s—at the same time, curiously enough, that studies of Berenson and Pater have flourished. In any event, formalism is considered by many to be dead, to have been too narrow in its approach to art that is informed by ideologies and symbolic structures not susceptible to formal analysis alone. That art is more than its form is a proposition beyond dispute. To read Pater on Giorgione's pastoralism, Berenson on Mantegna's love of antiquity, Fry on Van

Gogh's personality, and Greenberg on Paul Klee's fantasy and to recall the breadth of culture reflected in the writings of Pater and Berenson and their followers is to recognize that the "formalists" are not restricted in their interest only to form. But like the greatest critics before them and like those writing in their tradition, Pater and Berenson have justly insisted that the values of art, however we may define them and whatever our politics, philosophy, or method may be, reside in form and that it is through its form, and only through its form, that a work of art expresses its significance to us.



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Poems *by Donald Hall, Brad Leithauser, & Donald Petersen*

The granite state: contradiction and resolution

I.

On Ragged Mountain birches twist from rifts in granite
Great ledges show gray through sugarbush. Brown bears
doze all winter under granite outcroppings or in cellarholes
the first settlers walled with fieldstone.

Granite markers recline in the high abandoned graveyards.

Although split by frost or dynamite, granite remains unaltered;
earthquakes tumble boulders across meadows; glaciers
carry pebbles with them as they grind south
and melt north, scooping lakes for the Pennacook's trout;—
stone bulks, reflects sunlight, bears snow, and persists.

When highway-makers cut through a granite hill, scoring
deep trench-sides with vertical drillings, they leave behind
glittering sculptures—monuments to the granite state
of nature, emblems of permanence
that we worship in daily disease, and discover in stone.

2.

But when we climb Ragged Mountain past cordwood stumpage,
over rocks of a dry creekbed, in company of young hemlock,
only granite remains unkind. Uprising in summer, in woods
and high pastures, our sister the fern breathes, trembles,
and alters, delicate fronds outspread and separate.

The fox pausing for scent prints holes in hoarfrost.
Quail scream in the fisher's jaw; then the fisher dotes.
The coy-dog howls, raising puppies that breed more puppies
to rip the throats of rickety deer in March.
The moose's antlers extend, defending his wife for a season.

Mother-and-father grass lifts in the forsaken meadow,
grows tall under sun and rain, uncut, turns yellow,
sheds seeds, and under assault of snow relents; in May
green generates again. When the bear dies, bees construct
honey from nectar of cinquefoil growing through rib-bones.

3.

Ragged Mountain was granite before Adam divided. Grass
lives because it dies. If weary of discord
we gaze heavenward through the same eye that looks at us,
vision makes light of contradiction:
granite is grass in the holy meadow of the soul's repose.

—*Donald Hall*

Acorns

An oak twig drops
in the path as we climb
the slippery needled
slope from the pond: nine

flame-shaped leaves,
glossy, with yellow-
green sinews veering
out from red spines;

under the leaves, two
acorns divagate
from woody cups:
shiny, metallic,

verdant, as acorn-
meat presses from
inside out, volume
thrusting to smooth

the tumid surface
of tiny mast-woman
breasts, nipple-
points centering pale

aureoles. We climb
slowly, carrying
a wicker basket up
the slippery path.

—*Donald Hall*

Floating light in Tokyo

Having lost track of the time in your own
country, how long you've been up, how little
you slept on the plane, but finding yourself alone
in a small room in an enormous city

you take the elevator down to the dim
lobby and feeling just like a criminal slip
out for a walk beside the moated rim
of the Imperial Palace. It's late—

even the packed, desperate thoroughfares
of Central Tokyo are all but deserted.
Vistas have opened up, and the air's
cooled a bit at last. You can hear

a few horns honking in the distance,
also a heavy truck which, meeting
strong internal resistance,
manfully strains and strains as it climbs

into gear and rumbles off. Such sounds
deepen rather than deplete the sensation
of an enchanted spell of sleep that extends
over miles and millions. Yet it's you

who's about to awaken, as a bend in the moat
reveals a vision—enchanted, too—
of frenzy: a jeweled inner city afloat
in light, the mad neon dazzle of the Ginza . . .

The neon blazes cleanly in the old moat.
Lights on lights are overlaid in repeated
applications which soothe somewhat
a staggered, jet-lagged brain that longs

to rest yet somehow can't; for they fill
the mind as dreams do, these flourishing
ribbons on the ebony flux, the spill
of moons, keys and horns, the many-petaled rose

and amber and azure blooms that flare
and fade, flare and fade in rocking
even rhythms. How pleasing they are!—
these emblems from a Halloween magician's cape,

these colors selected for brightness alone,
recalling jars of fingerpaint on the low shelves
of a primary classroom. With regret, then,
you note an approaching duck, whose wake shivers

all reflections; and it hurts a little
to watch the neat incision being cut, the plush
collapse begin as the first nudging ripple
swings outwards. Yet as the duck, in passing,

transforms into a swan, the shapely S
of the neck lit in sudden fluorescent profile,
and familiar designs begin to coalesce
within the moat, which soon again will reflect

composedly, you'll grant that while the static
glaze was restful, welcome is this
queen of birds with the sea-serpentine neck,
who trails behind her such thrilling rubble.

—*Brad Leithauser*

Certain vers librists

They're so broad-minded they might *like* what I'm
About to say: "In plain American,
The language of the streets, let's praise the time
When Harry, plucky rooster, gave 'em hell."

But no, my foot gets in their way. It balks them.
Like this, it goes. And this. See how the line
Comes halting forth. One might trip over it.
And limp off, sore, nursing the bad, bad foot.

While these must dance untrippingly, and words
Come tripping off their tongues in prose fandangos,
Reeling through open forms, their manifesto
A studious ignorance of pentameters.

Cursing their natural fathers, they eschew
Old, worn-out Shakespeare. Shit, Mercutio,
Take that. Die, dog. Choke on your own discharge.
These free-verse guys have pulled the chain on you.

These high and mighty let their regular thoughts
Spiral down toilet throats with you old, square ones.
Pumped with breath-pauses, growing round and free,
Inspired, they now take flight. Oh, watch them soar

Out of their windows, over the startled streets,
Loosed by their slack, thin lines, raised up by pals'
Cheers, jokes, and dogmas wafting from the mountain—
Like puffed-up windbags full of angry gas.

—*Donald Petersen*

Clearing the shelf

We set ourself to a long and difficult art,
 An amateur at heart.
We said, "A poem should be like fragile ware,
 Perfect and bone-bare
And real enough to touch, if one has courage."
 That was a tender age.
Some cracked, and some, more obstinate than we,
 Kept their deformity.
Here are the crazed, misshapen, and time-tarnished
 Poems we once wished—
All that luck, zeal, and pains of craft would spare—
 Finished beyond repair.

—*Donald Petersen*

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Turning back the clock: art and politics in 1984

by Hilton Kramer

It is understood by now that all art is ideological and all art is used politically by the right or the left, with the conscious and unconscious assent of the artist. There is no neutral zone. Artists who remain stubbornly uninformed about the social and emotional effects of their images and their connections to other images outside the art context are most easily manipulated by the prevailing systems of distribution, interpretation, and marketing.

—Lucy R. Lippard, in the catalogue of the “Art & Ideology” exhibition at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York

Everyone who follows the course of current events in the art world must nowadays be aware of a troubling development that has lately manifested itself with increasing frequency. This is the concerted attempt now being made by a dedicated alliance of artists, academics, and so-called “activists” to politicize the life of art in this country. Not since the heyday of the anti-war movement in the Sixties and early Seventies have we seen anything quite like the present effort to impose a sectarian political standard on both the creation and the criticism of art. In more and more exhibitions, publications, symposia, and other public events, we are once again being exhorted to abandon artistic criteria and aesthetic considerations in favor of ideological tests that would, if acceded to, reduce the whole notion of art to little more than a facile, pre-

programmed exercise in political propaganda.

The tone in which these exhortations are articulated varies from the stridently militant to the earnestly “concerned.” But the message is invariably the same: in art, priority must now be given to a politically inspired “content,” as it is called; and in criticism, the governing assumption is a belief that all claims to aesthetic quality are to be regarded as mere subterfuge, masking some malign political purpose. It (almost) goes without saying that the politics being served by this effort to discredit all disinterested artistic activity is the politics of the radical Left. Its favored themes at the moment are nuclear disarmament, radical feminism, and support for revolutionary movements in Central America. The favored targets, of course, are the policies of the United States government in particular and the political and cultural institutions of democratic capitalism in general. Adding some piquancy to the whole shabby endeavor is the fact that a sizable part of this blatant political activity is funded, precisely because it claims to speak in the name of art, by such public agencies as the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, and the Department of Cultural Affairs of the City of New York—yet another example, I suppose, of supplying the rope to those who are eager to see us hanged.

Thus, since early December—to look no further back than that—the art calendar has

been fairly crowded with these unlovely political events. The busiest sponsor of them has no doubt been the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York. In a four-month period (December through March) it has organized, with the aid of federal, state, and municipal funds, two full-scale exhibitions on the requisite themes: "The End of the World: Contemporary Visions of the Apocalypse" and "Art & Ideology." "The End of the World" was mainly (though not entirely) devoted to the cause of nuclear disarmament, and, while paying ceremonial lip service to George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as a source of inspiration, actually derived its political rationale from Jonathan Schell's *The Fate of the Earth*. In "Art & Ideology" we were offered a more explicitly Marxist account of American society together with arguments (in the catalogue) calling for the political criticism of all cultural activity. The New Museum would appear to have embraced Lucy R. Lippard's dictum—that "There is no [politically] neutral zone" for art in our society—as a fundamental principle, and one naturally wonders if anyone involved in the governing of this institution understands that the principle itself is totalitarian in its very essence.

Meanwhile, the mall of the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, another institution supported by public funds, was given over to a more specialized political event—a show of objects and installations produced (as it was said) "by artists who are concerned about current U.S. policy in Central America." This was an undisguised propaganda effort in support of the Marxist-Leninist revolutionary movement in Central America, and staged to coincide with a program of exhibitions and speaking events, both in New York and elsewhere, organized by a group calling itself "Artists Call Against U.S. Intervention in Central America." In January this "Artists Call" group also won the support of a number of private art galleries, which gave over their space to its activities, and the eager cooperation of publications such as *Arts Magazine*, *Art in America*, *The Nation*, *The Village Voice*,

and sundry "alternative" journals around the country. At the same time, the Edith C. Blum Art Institute on the campus of Bard College chimed in with a political exhibition called "Art as Social Conscience," which, not surprisingly, included many of the same artists featured in the shows at the New Museum and the City University mall and praised in the pages of *Art in America* and *The Village Voice*. There was also a show devoted to "Women & Politics" at the Intar Latin American Gallery—another event, by the way, supported by funds from the NEA, the New York State Council on the Arts, and New York City's Department of Cultural Affairs. And then, lest the point of all this effort be lost on us, two of our leading art schools—Cooper Union and the Pratt Institute—joined in sponsoring a symposium in the Great Hall at Cooper Union on the theme of "War in Art." The speakers, of course, were mainly those prominently represented in the exhibitions and publications already mentioned. Their basic message is easily summarized: Since war is a terrible thing, we should all take up a position of radical pacifism and leave military victory to our enemies.

No doubt there have been other similar events which have escaped our attention. In the midst of such a well-organized campaign, one cannot be expected to keep track of every episode. But one other exhibition should be mentioned here—the show called "Dreams and Nightmares: Utopian Visions in Modern Art" at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington. This, too, claimed *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as its ostensible inspiration, and was not only more historical in its outlook but a good deal more circumspect than the other shows I have mentioned in keeping a discreet distance from the kind of open political commitment that is now standard policy, for example, at the New Museum of Contemporary Art. Yet "Dreams and Nightmares" was, all the same, a political exhibition. Careful as it was to exclude anything that might contain an explicit condemnation of current U.S. government policy—the Hirshhorn Museum is itself, after all, a gov-

ernment institution—the whole conception of the exhibition was pacifist in spirit, and clearly owed its inspiration to the anti-nuclear movement. It certainly showed no interest in distinguishing artistic quality from the most facile exploitation of political emotion, especially in its selection of contemporary examples.

I do not propose to attempt a detailed critical evaluation of all of the art which has been offered to us in these political exhibitions and extolled in the various texts and speeches written to advance its fortunes. Except for the historical examples included in the “Dreams and Nightmares” exhibition at the Hirshhorn, most of the art brought together in this ideological extravaganza exists on such a low level of artistic discourse that almost any critical analysis, even the most negative, would inevitably have the effect of suggesting a higher degree of aesthetic seriousness than, in fact, can be found in the work itself. The whole notion of artistic achievement is, in any case, what most of this art is specifically intended to repudiate, and it would therefore violate the spirit of the art—as well as the function of criticism itself—to pretend otherwise. Linda Weintraub, director of the Blum Art Institute at Bard College and organizer of the “Art as Social Conscience” exhibition, made the point herself with admirable candor in declaring that “The works are designed, unabashedly, for political and societal ends.” Whether or not the show could claim any aesthetic merit was not a question she found it appropriate to address.

She was right not to do so, of course. Where aesthetic merit, or even aesthetic intelligence, is not the issue, the discriminations appropriate to the study of art are clearly not called for. Yet what, then, was the show doing in the Bard College art gallery, which exists (we may presume) for the purpose of educating students in the experience of art? The whole point of an exhibition like “Art as Social Conscience” is not to illuminate the experience of art but, in Linda Weintraub’s words, to “jolt the viewer into a

new awareness of today’s most pressing social issues.” The exhibition announcement, gotten up to resemble the front page of a newspaper, helpfully enumerated what these “pressing social issues” were assumed to be: “nuclear war, unemployment, toxic waste, feminism, Reaganomics, and other timely social issues.” (The list was by no means complete, by the way. It omitted, among other things, the subject matter of a particularly odious little video tape in which the purposes of the American CIA and the Soviet KGB were presented as very much alike, quite as if the political systems they serve were equally evil.) It is theoretically conceivable, perhaps, that there might somewhere exist an artist capable of making a significant work of art out of such materials, but I frankly doubt it. What we can be certain of is that neither Linda Weintraub nor anyone else has yet discovered such an artist—and the awful fact is that she doesn’t even know that she hasn’t, so eager has she been to present these political substitutes as if they were artistic achievements.

It may be worth adding that the artistic nullity of the work in this and similar exhibitions would not, in my opinion, have been affected in any degree *as art* if its political content had been designed to promote the interests of President Reagan’s economic program or an increase in the defense budget or his re-election campaign. (It’s not likely that it would have been so designed, of course—or, if it had been, that Bard College would have exhibited it.) Bad art is bad art, whatever its political purpose, and only the most zealous supporter of the “no neutral zone” doctrine could seriously believe otherwise. I frankly doubt that Linda Weintraub is a true believer in this pernicious doctrine. Unlike the folks at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, who seem to believe in little else, she is probably not keenly interested in most of these issues or terribly well-informed about them, but has only succumbed to a current cultural fashion—but that, alas, is precisely the way the politicization of art is hastened on its course. Every militant “activist” like Lucy R. Lippard needs a great many

Linda Weintraubs in order for her political goals to be realized.

Let us look a little more closely at some representative objects that have been presented to us in these exhibitions as works of art. In the show at the City University mall we were shown, among much else, a huge, square, unpainted box constructed of wood and standing approximately eight feet high. On its upper sides there were some small openings and further down some words stencilled in large letters. A parody of the Minimalist sculpture of Donald Judd, perhaps? Not at all. This was a solemn statement, and the words told us why: "Isolation Box As Used by U.S. Troops at Point Salines Prison Camp in Grenada." The creator of this inspired work was Hans Haacke, who was also represented in the "Art as Social Conscience" exhibition by a photographic light-box poster attacking President Reagan. Such works are not only devoid of any discernible artistic quality, they are pretty much devoid of any discernible artistic existence. They cannot be experienced as art, and they are not intended to be. Yet where else but in an art exhibition would they be shown? Their purpose in being entered into the art context, however, is not only to score propaganda points but to undermine the very idea of art as a realm of aesthetic discourse. President Reagan and his policies may be the immediate object of attack, but the more fundamental one is the idea of art itself.

If it were possible to entertain any doubts on this score, they would surely be put to rest by several of the essays which the guest curators of the "Art & Ideology" exhibition at the New Museum have contributed to its catalogue. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, for example, who teaches art history at the State University of New York at Westbury, defends the propaganda materials he has selected for this exhibition by, among other things, attacking the late Alfred H. Barr, Jr., for his alleged failure to comprehend "the radical change that [modern] artists and theoreticians introduced into the history of aesthetic theory and production in the twen-

tieth century." What this means, apparently, is that Alfred Barr would never have accepted Professor Buchloh's Marxist analysis of the history of modern art, which appears to be based on Louis Althusser's *Lenin and Philosophy*. (Is this really what is taught as modern art history at SUNY Westbury? Alas, one can believe it.) On this point, at least, Professor Buchloh is surely correct, for what he offers us as art in this exhibition would probably never have been accepted by Alfred Barr as any sort of work of art at all. Here is Professor Buchloh describing one of the propaganda items that he has selected for the show—a series of photographs and printed documents assembled by Fred Lonidier and given the title, *L. A. Public Workers Point to Some Problems: Sketches Of The Present For Some, Point To The Future For All?*:

L. A. Workers Point to Some Problems . . . was published in excerpts in two issues of the weekly paper *The Citizen*, the official publication of the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor, AFL-CIO and was exhibited in both union halls and at the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art. The work addresses the questions of the detrimental impact, not to say disastrous consequences of federal and state legislation in favor of corporate and entrepreneurial interests on those sectors of public life and culture, that we would not normally be confronted with as a museum- or gallery-visiting art audience, since the system of representation that we traditionally refer to as "the aesthetic" by definition extracts itself—as it seemed—from the economic and the political reality of the basis of culture in everyday life, in order to construct the aesthetic mirage that generates pleasure due to its mysterious capacity to disembody and dissociate our perception from the weights and demands of the real. Lonidier's work successfully counteracts that tendency

We can at least be grateful that Professor Buchloh is not employed to teach expository writing, but this still leaves students of the history of modern art at SUNY Westbury in quite a lurch.

The situation at SUNY Stony Brook appears to be no better. Another guest curator of the "Art & Ideology" exhibition is the redoubtable Donald Kuspit, professor of art history at SUNY Stony Brook, and here are his concluding remarks on the two artists—Nancy Spero and Francesc Torres—he had selected for this show:

The works of Spero and Torres deal with martyrdom in the cause of freedom, humanity, and justice, a cause which seems uncertain because we see it only in critical, oppositional form, as a kind of protest against existing reality. We do not see what a world without torture of women and war would be like. Spero and Torres do not want us to see that future, for that would be to offer the utopian in place of the critically effective—the critical as social action. Such critical action is the only kind that can heal the split of spirit, for it alone shows us the futility of administrative control—the planned bombing missions, the planned murder of women—of destructive dominance.

I should explain, perhaps, that when Professor Kuspit refers early on in his essay for the catalogue to "the totalitarian mentality"—which he does repeatedly—he appears to have in mind the "existing reality," as he calls it, of American life.

This, then, is the kind of mentality—to use Professor Kuspit's term—that characterizes not only the "Art & Ideology" exhibition but the larger drift toward politicization we see making such headway on the art scene today. The notion that "There is no neutral zone" for art in our society has by no means become the dominant point of view of the art world. Far from it. At the moment it remains the program and commitment of a dedicated and well-organized minority faction. Yet to judge by the position lately won by an institution like the New Museum of Contemporary Art, it is now an *accepted* notion—quite as if it represented little more than an aesthetic option—and this is itself a frightening prospect. It is to the New Museum, strangely enough, that the Reagan

administration has entrusted responsibility for representing American art at the 1984 Venice Biennale. This is a development so bizarre that it quite takes one's breath away. Having worked its way up from an "alternative" space to an established institution, enjoying the patronage of government agencies and private foundations, the New Museum has now become a power in the art world, and that is very bad news indeed.

Yet the role of the New Museum, dismaying as that may be, and the other events I have been describing here, ghastly as they are, are finally less important in themselves than for the larger historical impulse they represent. For what we are now witnessing in this movement toward the politicization of art in this country is an attempt to turn back the cultural and political clock. And it is not to the radical counterculture of the Sixties that this movement looks back for its model and inspiration, despite the many resemblances it may bear to the outlook of the Sixties, but to the radicalism of the Thirties when so much of American cultural life was dominated by the hypocritical "social consciousness" of the Stalinist ethos. It is to a contemporary version of this old "social consciousness" that the protagonists of this political movement in the art world wish to confine the life of the artistic imagination. Hence the attacks on modernism and on such champions of the modernist aesthetic as Alfred Barr. For this new generation of radicals, it is the cultural life of the Forties and Fifties—when American art and literature finally vanquished the last respectable traces of the Stalinist ethos—that can never be forgiven. The Forties marked a great turning point not only in the history of American art but in the life of the American imagination, and any attempt to return American culture to the ideological straightjackets of the Thirties must inevitably attempt to discredit both the achievements and the values that belong to the post-World War II period. Hence, too, the increasingly raucous attempts to dismiss the accomplishments of the Forties and Fifties as nothing more than the political products of the Cold War.

Reflecting on this curious turnabout in our artistic affairs and on the apocalyptic note that is sounded again and again, ever more insistently, as the battle cry of the new cultural radicals in their campaign to politicize the life of art, I am reminded of a passage in one of the last of Lionel Trilling's many essays on this theme. In "Some Notes for an Autobiographical Lecture," which was posthumously published in a volume called *The Last Decade: Essays and Reviews, 1965-75*, Trilling gave us a glimpse into the train of thought that had led him to devote so much of his critical attention to what he described as the "unmasking" of "Stalinist-colored liberal ideas."

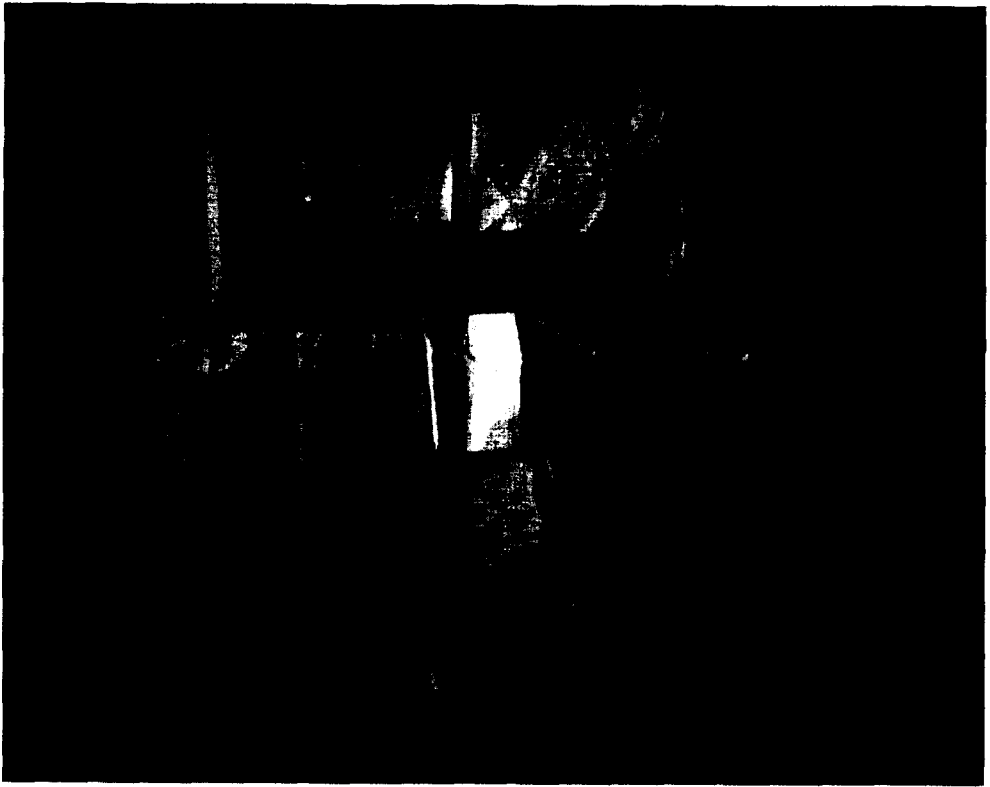
Behind my sense of the situation [Trilling wrote] was, I think, a kind of perception that I might call novelistic—that there was in the prevailing quality of the intellectual-political life a kind of self-deception: an impulse toward moral aggrandizement through the taking of extreme and apocalyptic positions which, while they *seemed* political, actually expressed a desire to transcend the political condition—which, as I saw things, and still do, meant an eventual acquiescence in tyranny.

It is, once again, toward precisely such "an eventual acquiescence in tyranny" that the doctrine announced in the statement, "There is no neutral zone," promises to lead us.

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Broadway goes to school

by Mimi Kramer

The publicity picture featured for *Open Admissions* in *The New York Times* on January 30 is a work of art. The scene it depicts would warm the heart of any teacher. In front of a blackboard an attractive young woman is bending over a youth, reading to him. The woman is white, the youth is black; neither is looking at the other because each, captivated by the book she holds between them, is focusing on some point far out on the horizon of imagination—that line we sometimes glimpse between what we already know and what we have only just fathomed there is left to learn. The young man's mouth is slightly open as though in dawning wonder and the teacher, leaning a little forward with pedagogical urgency, holds one hand slightly aloft, thumb and forefinger together, as though to catch the precise meaning of the glorious lines she reads—or no! Not “reads,” because she is not looking at the heavy volume balanced in her outstretched hand. Whatever the student is hearing, it is something the teacher knows so well that it is engraved on her heart.

Publicity stills, as a rule, are unenlightening. Cluttered, blurry and obscure, they tend to leave the newspaper reader at a loss to make out what is happening in the photo, let alone in the play being reviewed alongside. This photograph from *Open Admissions* was different. So fine was the detail and so eloquent the composition that (*multum in parvo*) it told a story on its own. And if you knew anything at all about the play—its

genesis, its subject, its point of view—the photograph could not fail to move you.

The Broadway *Open Admissions* is an expanded version of Shirley Lauro's one-act play of the same title, which was presented by the Ensemble Studio Theater in 1981. That earlier play had been an intelligent criticism of the policy from which it takes its name. Based on the author's own experiences as a “speech instructor” at a large city college in Manhattan, *Open Admissions* told of the confrontation between Alice Miller, an overworked and disillusioned professor, and Calvin Jefferson, the frustrated student who cannot understand why the system that promised him an education is teaching him nothing.

ALICE: Calvin . . . from the bottom of my heart . . . I want to help you . . .

CALVIN: By changin my words? Thass nothin . . . nothin! I got to know them big ideas . . . and which way to git em down.

If you remembered this exchange, or if you read, in the review of the Broadway version, about the open-admissions policy's relative failure to make good its promise of “higher education and a better life,” then you could locate what was happening in the play at the precise moment captured by the photograph.

The youth—you would suppose—has just made a connection for the first time. It has something to do with the words the teacher is reading, to be sure—“I cannot praise a

fugitive and cloister'd virtue," perhaps, or maybe, "Ay, but to die and go we know not where . . ."—but he has realized something, too, about language and ideas, nobility, excellence, greatness. Presumably, what he has learned is partly due to the book that lies open between them and partly to the expression on the woman's face, the far-off look in her eyes and the glinting, joyful, breathless reverence in her countenance.

The press still for *Open Admissions* featured in *The New York Times* on January 30 must be the greatest photograph in the history of theatrical publicity. It depicts a scene that never occurs in the play. In fact, the heart-warming and hope-fostering moment it immortalizes is one that never would, never could occur in the Broadway *Open Admissions*, for Ginny Carlsen (as the heroine is re-christened in this two-act, eleven-character version) spends the better part of two hours (an entire day in stage time) avoiding Calvin Jefferson and putting him off, categorically refusing to offer him even the most rudimentary assistance. The only book she ever brandishes at him is the textbook of the "Speech Communications" course she teaches four times a day and the only words she ever quotes are jargon.

That book in the picture—which the camera angle ingeniously makes the focus of attention—the book that has brought Calvin Jefferson his epiphany and that Ginny Carlsen cradles so lovingly in her outstretched palm: what can it be? What glorious words and phrases can Ginny Carlsen be intoning? Could it be something about Calvin's "positive communicator's image"?

"That's," [she says to him]. Not "Thass." Can't you hear the difference? "That's" one of the words in the Substandard Black Urban Pattern. No final "T's." Undermining your Positive Image . . . labeling you.

Is that what is inspiring the youth in the photograph? Or is it Ginny Carlsen's insight into the sibilant-palatal consonant cluster "sk"?

It's called a "Sharp S" problem with a medial

position "sk" substitution. See? "Skin, screw, scream"—those are "sk" sounds in the Primary Position. "Asking, risking, frisking"—that's medial position. And "flask, task, mask"—that's final position. Now you should be working on those, Calvin. Reading those exercises over and over again. I mean the way you did the Othello scene was just ludicrous: "Good gentlemen, I *ax* thee—" [*She crosses to the board and points to "ax-ing."* *She chuckles.*] That meant Othello was chopping the gentlemen down!

"Positive communicator's image"? "Medial position 'sk' substitution"? Are these the phrases Calvin Jefferson will never forget, the words engraved on Ginny Carlsen's heart? Gotta be—that is, unless somebody were going to rewrite the play.

But rewriting the play is the whole problem here. For Calvin Jefferson and Ginny Carlsen, for Shirley Lauro and the audience. The reviewers were generous to Shirley Lauro in treating her expansion of *Open Admissions* as a necessary evil. No one pretended that the "fleshing out" had been either well handled or desirable from a literary point of view. The additions, it was agreed, added very little. Ginny's gambling and unemployable husband and Calvin's psychotic assault on his sister and niece would be hackneyed dramatic devices even by the standards of television drama, and the ethnic stereotypes with which Lauro populates Ginny's classes, as well as the jaded colleague who shares Ginny's office, were caricatures, not characters. The enlargement of *Open Admissions* was a shame. Still, the verdict seemed to be that it was a shame worth putting up with in order to see so powerful a conflict, so honest a point of view, on Broadway. Shirley Lauro, after all, *knew* all about open admissions: she had really *been* there and, like Lazarus come from the dead, come back to tell us all, she had written this play. What the reviews failed to point out was that *Open Admissions*, as expanded for Broadway, so confuses the original issues and changes the terms of the initial conflict that any intended statement

or point of view has been garbled beyond all recognition.

As a one-act, two-character play *Open Admissions* presented a plausible and compelling conflict. The confrontation between student and teacher developed quickly and was over in well under half an hour. If we didn't know much about Alice Miller, there wasn't all that much time for us to realize or think about it. What we did know was largely confined to a single outburst:

I'm trying! God knows I'm trying. The times are rough for everyone. I'm a Shakespearean scholar, and they have me teaching beginning Speech. I was supposed to have 12 graduate students a class, 9 classes a week, and they gave me 35 Freshmen a class, 20 classes a week In Graduate School they told me I'd have a first-rate career. Then I started here and they said: "Hang on! Things will improve!" But they only got worse . . . and worse! Now I've been here for 12 years I'm exhausted . . . and I'm finished! We all have to bend. I'm just hanging on now . . . supporting my little girl . . . earning my living . . . and that's all.

In Shirley Lauro's one-act play we believed that the heroine really wanted to help Calvin, and if we didn't know exactly why she felt she couldn't, we accepted certain things on faith and pieced together others by inference: that Alice Miller was basically a decent person, for instance, and that as a teacher she was competent and responsible. The real trouble with the expanded version of *Open Admissions* is not the shabby insight it offers us into Ginny-Carlsen-at-home, but what it shows us about Ginny Carlsen as a teacher. And folks, she is a perfectly rotten teacher. A real lulu.

Take the "Shakespeare Project," for instance, whose goal Ginny defines as being "to bring the world of Shakespeare to life in the classroom." Sounds pretty good, doesn't it? In the one-act play we heard about a "Shakespeare Project" and we made certain assumptions: that this was Ginny Carlsen's way of beating the system, that with her

"Shakespeare Project" she was attempting to smuggle into the classroom and expose her students to certain things the open-admissions system could not afford to offer them—a quality of mind and language that transcended the jargon and mentality of socio-linguistics. Unfortunately, at the Music Box Theater on Broadway we see Ginny's "Shakespeare Project" in action.

Each student has been asked to memorize a speech from Shakespeare that he will recite and then go on to say a few words about why he identifies with the character he has chosen. As each student comes up to the podium to deliver his presentation, we, the audience, become Ginny's students and the theater is transformed into a lecture hall. It is the one innovative bit of staging that director Elinor Renfield has in store for us: it makes us at once Ginny's accomplices and her victims. We laugh uproariously as, one by one, a Korean, an Italian, and a Puerto Rican (portrayed in brilliant parodies by Una Kim, Vincent D'Onofrio, and Evan Miranda) rises and disgraces himself. Kitty Shim identifies with Peaseblossom's "cow-slips" because she works in her father's fresh-produce shop; Nick Rizzoli's uncle's widow remarried after a precipitous two years, so he identifies with Hamlet's revenge; and Juan Rivera, who has many girlfriends, thinks that Petruchio's notions of how to handle a woman are spot on. Through each presentation we watch Ginny Carlsen, and we become more and more disenchanted with her as a teacher.

Very good, Juan. Re-read the chapter on "English As A Second Language For Hispanics." There's your grade.

Does Ginny Carlsen teach? Does she respond to one of these young people with any sort of warmth or conviction? Does she correct a reading, enlarge a student's understanding? Fat chance. She sits despondently through each recitation, barely troubling to mask her boredom and indifference, and she responds to each student with the same thinly veiled disgust, facile word of praise,

and jargon-filled “lesson” from the “Speech Communications” textbook, dashing offstage when the bell sounds with a cursory “There’s your grade.”

For the most part Ginny’s students seem satisfied with the quality of their instruction: they grunt and smirk contentedly at the grades she gives them and scamper into the wings. For them, as for her, Ginny’s class is just something to get through without worrying too much about. Only the (goal-oriented) Korean girl pursues the issue: her father will be disappointed when she brings home a “B” instead of an “A.” When she approaches her teacher we see that Ginny feels no more responsible to her students individually than she feels toward them *en masse*. She refuses the girl either an explanation for the grade or any suggestion as to how to improve herself. “I don’t have time to talk to you now. Set up a conference,” says Ginny.

As it turns out, Ginny hasn’t got time for much of anyone or anything—her husband, her daughter, or her students. Which brings up the question of just what is supposed to be keeping Ginny Carlsen so busy. She talks a lot about grading papers, preparing classes, and advising students, but we never see her engaged in any of these activities. And what we actually see her engaged in is all so shoddily done that it’s hard to see how she can spend much time doing it. Ginny bulldozes her way through the first act showing little ability to do anything but walk rather quickly: this she does with heel-tapping efficiency.

Two people Ginny particularly doesn’t have time for are Calvin Jefferson, the hero, and her colleague Clare Block. Most of the action of the first act is punctuated by their attempts to engage Ginny in conversation. Ginny hasn’t got time to attend the curriculum committee meeting scheduled that day (which will determine the future of what and how her students learn) or even to stop and talk to her colleague about it. Confidentially, we are glad that Ginny won’t hobnob with Professor Block: she goes in for “grouping” on the Island and is wheeling

and dealing in real estate. But Calvin is another story.

Calvin approaches Ginny several times in the course of Act I. He comes early and tries to catch her before school; he waylays her in the hallway; he hangs about her office waiting. All Calvin wants is a little help on this *Othello* thing he has to present. We’ve seen him working hard on it, but the fact is that he doesn’t really understand a word. Ginny hasn’t got time to talk to him. Why didn’t he set up a conference weeks ago? She’s all booked up until next month! Of course, poor Calvin didn’t know he was going to have trouble with the assignment, but Ginny is unrelenting. She’s terribly sorry, Calvin, but really she hasn’t got a moment to spare. She’s even going without lunch! In a grand selfless gesture Ginny offers to fit him in on Monday. But Calvin’s presentation is at four o’clock that very day. The bell rings and with a smile as phoney as the day is long and a word of advice about setting up a conference in advance next time, Ginny is off.

Poor Calvin. He’ll just have to muddle through, somehow. Calvin’s presentation is a disaster. He balks twice, refuses even to go through the motions. And why should he, after all? *He* knows he doesn’t understand the speech; he doesn’t need some college professor to tell him that. That’s what he was trying to tell *her*! But Ginny remains calm, persuasive, unyielding. Calvin, she points out, has “a good support system right here: listeners ready to receive your communications.” “Try,” says Ginny with a smiling nod. By this time the audience is squirming in agonies of sympathy with Calvin’s humiliation. And it is a humiliation: Calvin stumbles through less than half of the speech before breaking down. There! says Ginny Carlsen, that wasn’t so bad! You see? “There’s your grade, Calvin.” And, with a whoosh, she’s gone. When Calvin, prior to rushing offstage, opens the piece of paper and howls an obscenity, we are ready for a confrontation.

The scene in which Calvin goes to argue with Ginny about his grade is the one structural improvement over Lauro’s earlier ver-

sion. In the one-act, two-character play we found out Calvin's grade eight lines into the scene. In the Broadway version there is enough preliminary skirmishing to build up the audience's expectation. Everyone around you gasps as Calvin demands to know "How come I got a 'B'?"—and you gasp with them. Unless you are a teacher, that is, in which case you smile cynically as Shirley Lauro sets about exploding The Myth of the "B." Indeed, her treatment of the "B" syndrome is truly masterful, a verbal contest in which she reveals the process of rationalizing double-think that makes Ginny's job possible.

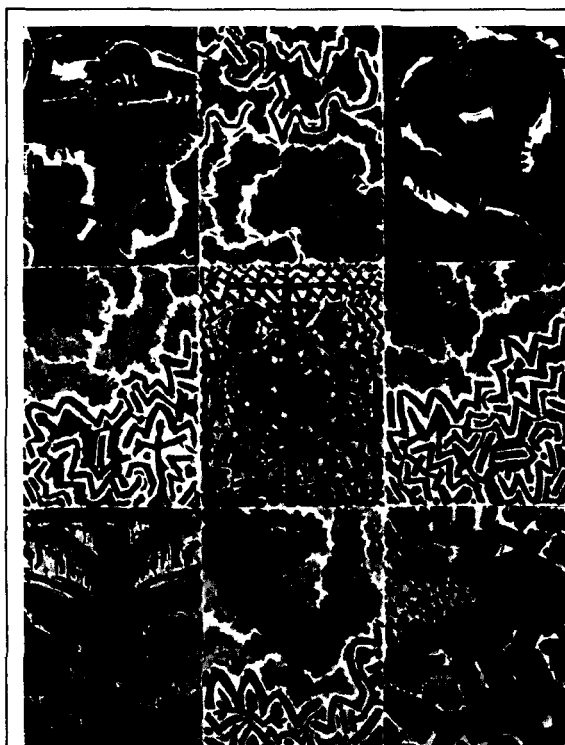
Why *did* Calvin get a "B" for that first project? "Well, it was your first time up in class, and you showed a lot of enthusiasm and effort," says Ginny. And he responds:

That girl sits nex to me, that Judy Horowitz—
firss time she was up in class too. She give that
speech about "How to Play the Guitar?" And
man, she brought in charts and taught us to
read chords and played a piece herself an had

memorized the whole speech by heart. And
you give her a "B."

But "Judy's organization on her outline was a little shaky, as I recall," says Ginny. It is impossible not to be scandalized by this little exposé; at the same time, it is impossible not to understand and sympathize. Handing out undeserved "B's" is the disaffected teacher's last refuge from despair in a system that, for whatever reason, does not allow for academic standards to be upheld. That is the virtue of this scene: it poses the only real conflict in a play that is otherwise like an advanced course in shadowboxing. There is just one problem with the scene, however: it makes the rest of the play implausible.

In the original version of *Open Admissions* a student walked into his teacher's office and effectively blew the whistle on her. "How come you don't sit down with me and teach me which way to git my ideas down instead of givin me a 'B,'" he demanded. It was just conceivable that it might take ten or fifteen more minutes for this young man to per-



The Walls of The Mission, 1983, oil/paper, 90" x 66"

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suade the teacher to help him. What is not plausible is that she would refuse and go *on* refusing through an entire remaining act. I don't care what her situation was—if her husband were a junkie dog-catcher and her identity were in tatters—a real teacher can only go on fooling herself as long as she believes that her students genuinely *prefer* placebo grades to education. It is inconceivable that she would respond to Calvin Jefferson as Ginny Carlsen does: by continuing the charade.

Look, last year we got 10 black students into Ivy League Graduate Programs. And they were no better than you. They were just *perceived* as better. Now that's the whole key for you . . . to be perceived as better! So you can get good recommendations and do well on interviews . . . All we have to do is work on improving your Positive Communicator's Image. Don't you see?

To ask us to believe in this response from any teacher challenged as Ginny Carlsen has been challenged—"What's that 'B' standin for anyhow? Cause it surely ain't standin for no piece of work!"—is ludicrous. She would have to be a monster!

But a monster is exactly what the heroine of *Open Admissions* has become in this new version. There are many ways of "opening out" a play and there were many things left unexplained in the one-act version of *Open Admissions*. It is hard to believe, for instance, that a "poetry" professor would feel as comfortable with the jargon of "speech communications" as Ginny Carlsen seems to be. What was her doctoral thesis on, the poetry of Edgar A. Guest? In the same way, it is difficult to understand how after twelve years of doing this sort of teaching Ginny has not developed a better rapport with her students. Calvin Washington, is it? she greets the hero. So much careless, tactless negligence begins to look a little like hostility. Now one can accept all this, believe that a once-competent and well-intentioned teacher had begun to feel so hostile toward

the system that she might behave as Ginny Carlsen behaves. But then one would want to know why.

Had Shirley Lauro wanted to, she might have *enhanced* her play by strengthening its conflict. That would have meant making us both more sympathetic toward Ginny and more critical of her. With all that running time to fill she might have taken us back to the beginning and shown us Ginny Carlsen ten years ago and a little of the system that had brought her to this pass. But Shirley Lauro's extended, screenplay-like treatment makes no attempt to sympathize with the teacher's predicament—not really. Sympathy for Ginny is accorded a certain amount of lip service by the family problems with which Broadway has endowed her. Poor Ginny! She's worrying about her husband's job. But even this is only personal sympathy. Professionally, everything in the script seems calculated to make the audience hate her.

And hate her we do. How can we admire her refusal to take "group" conferences when we see that her alternative is to ignore her students entirely? Why should we be surprised when the wheeling-dealing colleague turns out to have killed a motion, in Ginny's absence, that would have improved the quality of students' education at the school. "You stopped it?" whispers Ginny in pious disbelief. "You used my name?" In view of the fact that Professor Carlsen was too busy even to find out what the issues were, it is hard to sympathize with her.

So instead of sympathizing, throughout the play we gasp and cluck our tongues at Ginny's tactlessness, hypocrisy, and covert racism. We "tsk, tsk!" when she commends Calvin for his "native intelligence" and draw in our breath when he points out that all the black students in the class have been forced to memorize a speech from *Othello* while other students were given a choice. We squirm and fidget when she begins nattering on about "Stanislavsky and the importance of 'identifying' and 'feeling' the part." And each time that obnoxious bell rings—unnecessarily harsh and loud—we jump two feet in the air, our angry muttering getting

more and more voluble, less restrained. It is a form of living theater, I suppose, all aimed at bringing us to the point where we will not rest until we have seen Ginny Carlsen brought low, humiliated as she has humiliated the hero. And it works. By the time Calvin, back at home again, goes berserk with his cute little niece—"I ain't got control! I just a crazy nigger inside! They ain't nothin to hang onto . . ."—we feel very much as he does. We are all just longing to see his wrongs avenged. Consequently, when Calvin later assaults Ginny in turn (the play is rather up and down), putting his hands around her throat (Othello-like) in the extremity of his rage and helplessness, it requires a physical effort to keep from calling out, "Squeeze, Calvin, squeeze!"

The original version of *Open Admissions* presented Calvin and Ginny both as victims of the system. On Broadway, Ginny Carlsen has become utterly contemptible, an unwitting but still willing tool of a sort of cosmic racism. And the accusing finger has entirely

changed direction: where once it gestured vaguely but suggestively at the idea of "open admissions," now it is pointed directly at Ginny herself. Even the play's title has shifted in meaning. Instead of revealing certain hard-core realities about an idealistic public policy it ends up referring to the personal admissions that Ginny is forced to make about herself: that her marriage is a disaster and her teaching a sham. As for that moving final scene—in which Calvin corners Ginny again and she teaches him to pronounce the word "ask" properly, so that the curtain falls swiftly on the echoing "Ax-ing . . . Aks-ing . . . ass-king . . . asking . . . asking . . . asking . . ."—it is made possible only by the fact that Ginny has had such a dreadful row with her husband that she doesn't want to go home. Presumably, had Ginny managed to patch up relations with her husband, Calvin would have gone through the rest of his life illiterate and we would never have witnessed this touching scene. On the whole it all seems a bit fortuitous. I'm glad I didn't cry.

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A toga for Washington

by Fred Baumann

Garry Wills's new book, *Cincinnatus: George Washington and the Enlightenment*,¹ seems meant to put an artistic seal on his project of refounding America. Where before he was *Inventing America* or *Explaining America*, now he is sculpting America. In Washington, Wills finds an emblem for the nobler America, replete with classical republicanism, that he thinks we have basely abandoned. Wills's general project has a long pedigree. Merely to point to it is to indicate what makes this book so intriguing on first glance, yet ultimately so unsatisfactory and frustrating.

Emerging in the 1960s from the Catholic conservatism that had originally led him to *National Review*, Wills was repelled by what he saw as the baseness of Locke's classical liberalism. In his earlier books he sought to wrest the American founding (and thus, one assumes, the American future) from those for whom the Republic is based on Tocqueville's "low but solid" principle of self-interest. Though his earlier forays into the history of ideas led Wills to conclusions—most notably his suggestion that Locke's thought had had little influence on the Declaration of Independence—that proved unsustainable under serious inspection, he was nonetheless working a rich lode in American as well as European thought, one that either con-

demns liberalism for its vulgarity or offers hopes of a nobler liberalism yet to come. It is a sign of the breadth of this tradition, of its transcendence of the party conflicts of Left and Right, that Wills could remain faithful to it all during his journey from *National Review* to his final destination as the writer of an introduction to Lillian Hellman's *Scoundrel Time*.

There are, of course, more characters in this play than Wills and Hellman. After all, the critique of classical liberalism yokes together as unlikely a pair as Rousseau and Burke, and connects so varied a group of thinkers as Schiller, Marx, Henry Adams, Mill, and Tocqueville (and even such contemporaries as Irving Kristol, whose essay "When Virtue Loses All Her Loveliness" is a classic of the genre). As might be expected of such a rich intellectual tradition, it has something important to tell us. A political order conceived solely as the guarantor of private interests runs into difficulty the moment it requires the sacrifice of those interests for the common good. Public spirit, patriotism, and even civic religion are necessary to allow even the most liberal regime to seem legitimate. Unfortunately, it has often proven difficult to ground these qualities solely on the calculations of self-interest.

The complexity of this tradition requires that we be quite precise about just what excellences and virtues are to be praised and emulated, and just how they correspond to the rest of the institutions and principles

1 *Cincinnatus: George Washington and the Enlightenment*, by Garry Wills; Doubleday, 191 pages, \$18.95.

of society. In a world in which everyone from Ronald Reagan to Ronald Dworkin talks of sacrifices and virtues, it is important to keep one's hand firmly on one's intellectual wallet. When Garry Wills brings down that old bust of Washington from the attic, dusts it off, explains the political and moral symbolism of the ornamentation, and, without blushing, tells us not only that Washington deliberately posed for it in order to impress us with his virtues, but even more, that we really ought to be impressed, he deserves a serious examination. For our own good, though, we ought also to require a careful account of just what it is we are supposed to emulate.

Cincinnatus has a certain charm. Wills knows how to heighten the attractiveness of the refurbished antique, the old-new thing that we had forgotten all about but that now seems to suit us so well. He also has chosen his subject aptly. In Washington, Wills deals with a subject who really did seek to define himself as a model for emulation by future Americans. Thus, Wills begins on strong ground. He finds at the origins of America public-spiritedness, heroism, and exemplary morality, as well as their aesthetic idealization. All of this is part and parcel of the America of classical republicanism he wants to persuade us to emulate.

For Wills, Washington was above all a "virtuoso of resignations," a man who knew "the creative powers of surrender." Wills focuses on Washington's farewell to the army, his reluctance to participate in the Constitutional Convention, and his Farewell Address—as well as on the works of art that commemorate them. Wills contends that Washington sought to increase his power by pruning its exercise. Washington wanted to pave the road from charismatic rule to legal rule and to give an example of public-spiritedness. In a circular letter to the governors of the states in 1783 pleading for a stronger central government, Washington mentions his own resignation from command of the army, lest they take his advice badly and "ascribe to arrogance and ostenta-

tation what I know is alone the result of the purest intention." He appeals to "the rectitude of my own heart" and to "the part I have hitherto acted in life, the determination I have formed, of not taking any share in public business hereafter." Washington is so careful not only to observe but to be seen to observe the proper limits of a republican general that his mere example serves to shame patriotic officers who want to clean up the mess the civilians are making. Wills seems to be suggesting that Washington's precedent has saved us from the false, interventionist public-spiritedness of those Latin American generals who periodically overthrow civilian governments.

Wills even defends Washington's deep reluctance to attend the Constitutional Convention. Wills sees this reluctance as the careful hoarding of moral capital by a man who understood that his reputation for disinterested obedience to the law could only be spent in the Republic's cause at great risk, and then only once. And Wills sees the Farewell Address as Washington's attempt to bequeath to the nation his personal independence and his ideal of self-government by self-limitation. Wills's argument can thus be seen in the Gelasian terms of church-state relations. His Washington invariably sacrifices *potestas*, the power to compel obedience in specific matters, for *auctoritas*, the general authority or legitimacy that persuades men to obey by the power of example, not by giving reasons.

A great deal of Wills's text is devoted to enthusiastic descriptions of a number of works of art that celebrate Washington. Many of them take for their theme Washington as a Cincinnatus returning to Mount Vernon to farm. Thus the book ends with a bravura description of Houdon's statue depicting that scene and Byron's praise of "The Cincinnatus of the West/Whom Envy dared not hate." Earlier we get battle-pictures, quasi-pietas, and even resurrections. Here Wills is able to flesh out the "rounded image" of Washingtonian virtues as they were understood by his contemporaries and depicted to inspire the young. We find mili-



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tary heroism, stern nobility, dignity, severity, as well as tenderness, humanity, democratic simplicity, and, above all, public-spirited self-restraint: in sum, the virtues of classical republicanism.

As described by Wills, classical republicanism seems so fine that one can only wonder why we ever stopped ordering it. Alas, this is one of the drawbacks of the aesthetic representation of moral qualities or political arguments: it produces an empathic answer without offering a means of thinking about the question. We see all the virtues combined—rosy-cheeked Red Guards helping Grandma plant cabbages, the military hero cheerfully casting off his cloak and taking up his walking stick, physical beauty accompanying moral worth—but we do not, and cannot, see if all this makes sense. Doubtless an historical example like Washington, who really did retire to his farm, is gold for the inculcators of civic virtue. Yet it is not enough, even for those who wish to emulate a hero, simply to meditate on his deeds. We still have to figure out what motivated him

in order to know what emulation would mean today.

In his treatment of these works depicting Washington, above all in his description of Houdon's statue, Wills begins to approach one difficulty of democratic heroism: how one is to depict it at all. For Wills, as for the artist, there is the risk of making heroism undemocratic, so exalted that, while many would adore the model, very few would think of imitating it. Wills gets around the difficulty by pointing to two elements and implying a third in the democratizing of heroism. First, presenting heroism in the terms of classical simplicity allows the understatement of the noble to merge with the plainness of the democratic. Second, the heroism can be conveyed by secular imagery: thus, comparisons of Washington to Moses did not catch on; classical images, above all Cincinnatus, were preferred. And finally, the severe lines of the classical prototypes are softened when Rome is passed through a bath of Rousseauian sentiment. Thus Wills rehabilitates Parson Weems's notorious

cherry-tree story. He points out that in Weems's version young George was told in advance by his father that, because he would be loved all the more for telling a difficult truth, he stood only to gain by his admissions. When self-interest and self-overcoming coincide to mutual benefit, classical virtue begins to look distinctly more imitable. Through these techniques, which show "such tenderness at the heart of republican severity," Washington's celebrators, Wills among them, convey that happy combination of apparent opposites, of military glory and civilian self-abnegation, power in action and power in submission, which characterizes democratic heroism.

Inevitably, Wills draws some contemporary parallels. From Washington's neutrality proclamation in 1793 through the Farewell Address, he steered a middle course between the Anglophile Hamilton and the Francophile Jefferson. This was a course, Wills tells us, whose subtlety none of Washington's distinguished advisors comprehended and whose wisdom one cannot in retrospect doubt. Washington, after all, understood at once the folly of allying with a soon-to-be Napoleonic France and the imprudence of dashing in to save the balance of power by supporting England. He knew that America needed time "to settle and mature its yet recent institutions," that America's advantage "came not from her own power, but from the leverage given to a nonaligned force when the giants are locked in struggle for world domination." Hence, America "must be something set apart." Only this knowledge, Wills tells us, kept America out of the Napoleonic wars, which were to turn into "a worldwide ideological conflict of the sort we have been familiar with throughout the modern Cold War." To drive the point home, a litany of our present shortcomings follows:

We have seen the world in terms of permanent blocs, where what is done by one part is taken as done by the whole. We entered Korea and Vietnam under the assumption that those countries were the instruments of China, and

China of Russia . . . What Russia was for we had to be against and vice versa. Could there be a more complete fulfillment of the Farewell Address's warning?

The message here is clear enough: America Come Home. Apparently, we are to see George McGovern as the heir of George Washington, and Henry Kissinger as the naïve Hamilton, who thought that a balance of power had to be fought for.

As political reasoning, this is preposterous. By now America has had more time than have most countries to mature its institutions. More to the point, America has not been in a position since 1939 to use the leverage of a nonaligned and minor power to affect the struggle of the giants. America is one of the giants whom the smaller powers look to or on whom they use their own leverage. Obviously, the eighteenth century did not know the kind of military technology that can turn traditional peripheral powers and island nations into frontline combatants, nor did it anticipate the recrudescence of a form of oriental despotism that the twentieth century displays under the name of "totalitarianism."

But the crudity of Wills's reasoning suggests a deeper problem. Either Wills is himself taken in by the trappings of Washington as emblem, so that for him democratic heroism always means going home to Mount Vernon, or else he wants to use that emblem not just to meditate on the actual possibilities of democratic heroism but also to urge particular policies on the contemporary world.

Our doubts about Wills's actual intentions are intensified by a passage in which he discusses Washington's desire for fame. He begins by facing the fact that Washington's consideration for his reputation was based on an "other-directed" view of himself." Because Washington had pride, he could instill pride in others. But at the end of the chapter on "Fame" Wills must confess:

I should make it clear that I do not describe the ideal expressed in the cult of Washington

because I think it the highest ideal, or one appropriate for any other time. In many ways, our own ideals are superior to those of the revolutionary period—more egalitarian, certainly; and in some ways more compassionate.

Wills cannot have it both ways. The morality of heroism, of exemplars, is plainly rooted in aristocratic notions of honor, notions that are just as surely “other-directed” as they are non-egalitarian. This is not to say that such notions are attractive to us as contemporary democrats or even to question that they are subject to powerful logical and philosophic objections. But if one is unwilling to take these notions seriously, what happens to the classic republicanism and exemplary morality—the antique dress and allegorical statuary—that Wills has almost persuaded us once more to accept? They become in fact no more than costumes to strike noble poses in, devices to give a mere high gloss to the pursuit of egalitarian and compassionate ideals.

Washington was no utopian, and it is precisely this down-to-earth quality that Wills wants to praise. In foreign policy, Wills contrasts the cool, aristocratic, and neutralist Washington with his sweaty, vulgar, and ideologically involved successors. Yet ultimately Wills is leery of going all the way, of merging Washington into Henry Adams. We are apparently to imitate the nice things about Washington, the self-abnegation, the refusal to use power. But Wills is careful to assure us that we can do without the very aristocratic and prideful norms that made all those grand refusals impressive, and even possible, in the first place.

Washington was a “virtuoso of resignations” because he was capable of an extremely subtle refinement of aristocratic pride and self-assertion. Certainly no democratic politician who has spent his life assuring the voters that he is just one of them could possibly use power as sparingly as Washington did. The authority Washington hoarded and that proved more powerful than power itself was derived from the exercise of command in its clearest form, the command of the mil-

itary. For Wills to praise Washington as a model while dismissing as inferior the ideals he lived by is to abandon the problem his case poses. What is more, to apply Washington’s example without reflection to contemporary politics is to misuse the awe we feel for him.

It will take more than invocations of Cincinnatus to explain to us what the democratic heroism of Washington really signified. Cincinnatus, after all, was a member of the ruling caste of a very tightly knit *urbs* with standards of caste loyalty and public service far beyond those that any modern state requires. Nor will references to eighteenth-century classical republicanism give much guidance. The celebrated eighteenth-century Roman revivalist Maximilien Robespierre found that classical republicanism required that he stay in Paris and direct the Terror. Alas, there are no touching pictures of Robespierre returning to Arras to settle down to a career in the family law firm. The eighteenth century’s images of classical republicanism will not tell us why Washington chose to subject himself to the constituted authorities, while Robespierre, out of the best Roman motives, had the legitimate authorities executed or driven into exile.

Wills sees the need to distinguish Washington from Robespierre. Washington’s classical ideals were adopted for their own sake, he says, not, as with Robespierre, “out of a suspicion that religion’s hold was unshakable.” Hence, however stern and inflexible Washington was, “there was no ferocity in his devotion, no touch of the hysterical, as in Robespierre.” Similarly, Wills tells us that “[f]or Napoleon to be turned into a Christ-like miracle worker shows the ambivalence of the French Revolution towards religious symbols.” But this gives the game away. The reason for all the worship of reason and the feasts of the Supreme Being was precisely to create a classical *polis* out of France by giving it a civil religion. Noting Rousseau’s insistence on the need for civil religion, which creates bonds of fraternity and public-spirit-edness, the Jacobins sought to create—of all

Tony Delap

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things—a classical republic. The posturing, the inauthentic search for authenticity, the hollow Catonizing that Büchner made the subject of *Dantons Tod* and that gives the period its grotesque and even farcical character—all were the product of this hopeless and rather literal-minded quest to turn France into a fraternal *polis* of democratic aristocrats.

Why didn't classical republicanism result in the frenzied devotion to revolution and the state when it occurred in the United States? The reason, of course, is precisely that the United States was *not* intended to be an ancient *polis*. Rather it was meant to be a place where limited government allows individuals to pursue their private interests and in so doing to prosper peacefully while harming no one. Washington could go home to Mount Vernon because it was not his duty to mold a race of Spartans or Romans. This conception of duty, while very public-spirited in a highly refined way, was also private-spirited in a very straightforward and very American way. Far from

denouncing (as Pericles did) any citizen who did not interest himself in public affairs, Americans looked with suspicion on those who were too interested in public affairs and reproached them, often with the example of Washington. It was the American's main purpose to exercise his rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—which for most people, including Virginia planters, meant largely the pursuit of property. Thus, beneath the nobly draped toga of Washington-as-Cincinnatus can be seen the bourgeois garments of that old reprobate John Locke himself.

The irony is compounded when one recalls just why the Jacobins aspired to an elevated classical republicanism. It was in Rousseau's critique of Lockean liberalism, of its inequality and selfishness, its hypocrisy and inhumanity, that the ideal of revolutionary fraternity gained its meaning and its program. Put another way, France had to be a *polis* and Robespierre had to be a Terrorist because the French Revolution embraced precisely those egalitarian and compassion-

ate ideals that Wills thinks are superior to Washington's. The point deserves stress: If we wish to imagine what a hybrid "classical republicanism" on an egalitarian and compassionate basis would look like, we need look no further than Robespierre.

Wills has misused the eighteenth century's classical republicanism in its own terms, neglecting the extent to which Washington's moderation was due to the limited ambitions of the liberal state. He has also abused classical republicanism by employing it rhetorically to support an isolationist foreign policy. It should be said that he is not the first to try to have it both ways. There has always been something bogus about the Enlightenment's appropriation of classical dress and principles. The story of Washington as depicted by the sculptors, poets, and painters is a typical Enlightenment story of the wild beast that turns out, delightfully, to be tame. Whether in Goethe's *Novelle*, where the dangerous tiger turns out to be a pussycat, or in the *Abduction from the Seraglio*, where the fanatical oriental despot turns out to be an extremely civilized gentleman who even lets the tenor go off with the girl, or in *Faust*, where it is God who unexpectedly relents, the Enlightenment felt sure that it could soften and tame men by giving them the freedom to satisfy their real needs, even in the hardest cases. Yet at the same time the Enlightenment assured itself that the beast had not lost anything by being tamed, that nobility was all the nobler for bending to the common yoke. It is in this corollary assurance, not in the story of the tamed beast itself, that a false tone creeps in.

Wills gives an excellent example of the problem, though for him it is merely another aspect of his theme. He describes a study by Benjamin West where Benjamin Franklin is shown in his laboratory accompanied by the "angels" of the spheres, who are "intimately involved in the experiments of Franklin's 'heavenly' laboratory." Wills notes that the apparent "apotheosis" is actually "*meant as an inverted apotheosis*"

(Wills's italics), that the cosmic effects are "meant as anti-cosmogonies, a secularization of creation myths and heavenly inspiration." Similarly, describing two paintings of Franklin's laboratory, Wills notes that the light "gives off the glow of the new science," and, following Starobinski, contends that it was "part of the Enlightenment's program" to make light immanent and thus to secularize the imagery of wisdom. The suggestion of Franklin as Prometheus only works, however, if one believes, at some level, in Prometheus. To glorify a hero with the apparatus of classical or medieval cosmogonies, while signaling all the while that really one doesn't believe a word or a brushstroke of it, is simply to exploit cultural capital. This manipulation must end either in the vulgar materialism Orwell found so distressing in the Left of his day, or in those absurd Canova-style nudes with electric light bulbs emerging from their heads that one can still see on the second floor of the Renwick Gallery in Washington. The taming of the world by science and liberalism had a price attached to it. One just could not dress oneself in classical garments, put a lightning rod in one's hand, and be satisfied that one was Zeus.

The imagery Wills relies on thus represents an acknowledgment of the dilemma the Enlightenment and liberalism have presented us. This dilemma is the excessive domestication of the world, the problem Wills has really been addressing all along. It is perhaps *the* problem of liberal societies, because the contempt felt for such societies by their artists, intellectuals, and politically ambitious climbers is an ever-present and sometimes lethal danger. That Wills addresses it is praiseworthy. That he pays tribute to Washington and reminds us that true nobility can indeed co-exist with a modern, liberal republic is a beginning. But that he abandons his proper task and falls into posturing and extremely dubious ideological salesmanship is a sign of political and intellectual failure.

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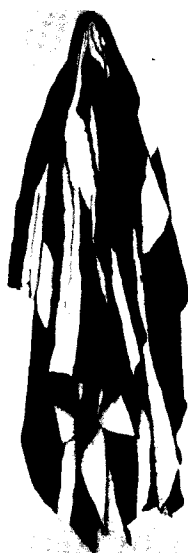
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reviewed by *Bruce Bawer*

The first thing one notices about Elizabeth Bishop's *Collected Prose* is that it is even slimmer than her remarkably slender *Complete Poems*, published last year. The second thing one notices is that this collection would never have qualified for Donald Hall's "Poets on Poetry" series: it contains not a single book review or interview or poetic manifesto. What it does contain, rather, are seventeen pieces which are, to a surprising extent, prose equivalents of Bishop's poetry. The style is, for the most part, exquisitely simple, the tone sensitive yet controlled, the form largely descriptive. Consider, for example, this passage from "Memories of Uncle Neddy" about one colorful consequence of living in Rio de Janeiro:

Except for the fact that they give me asthma,
 I am very fond of molds and mildews. I love
 the dry-looking, gray-green dust, like bloom
 on fruit, to begin with, that suddenly appears
 here on the soles of shoes in the closet, on the
 backs of all the black books, or the darkest
 ones, in the bookcase. And I love the black
 shadow, like the finest soot, that suddenly
 shows up, slyly, on white bread, or white walls.
 The molds on food go wild in just a day or
 two, and in a hot, wet spell like this, a tiny
 jungle, green, chartreuse, and magenta, may
 start up in a corner of the bathroom. That
 gray-green bloom, or that shadow of fine soot,
 is just enough to serve as a hint of morbidity,
 attractive morbidity—although perhaps mor-
 tality is a better word. That gray-green sug-
 gests life, the sooty shadow—although living,
 too—death and dying.

The image conjured up by this passage would fit perfectly into a Bishop poem; indeed, properly broken into lines, the passage might itself pass for a Bishop poem.

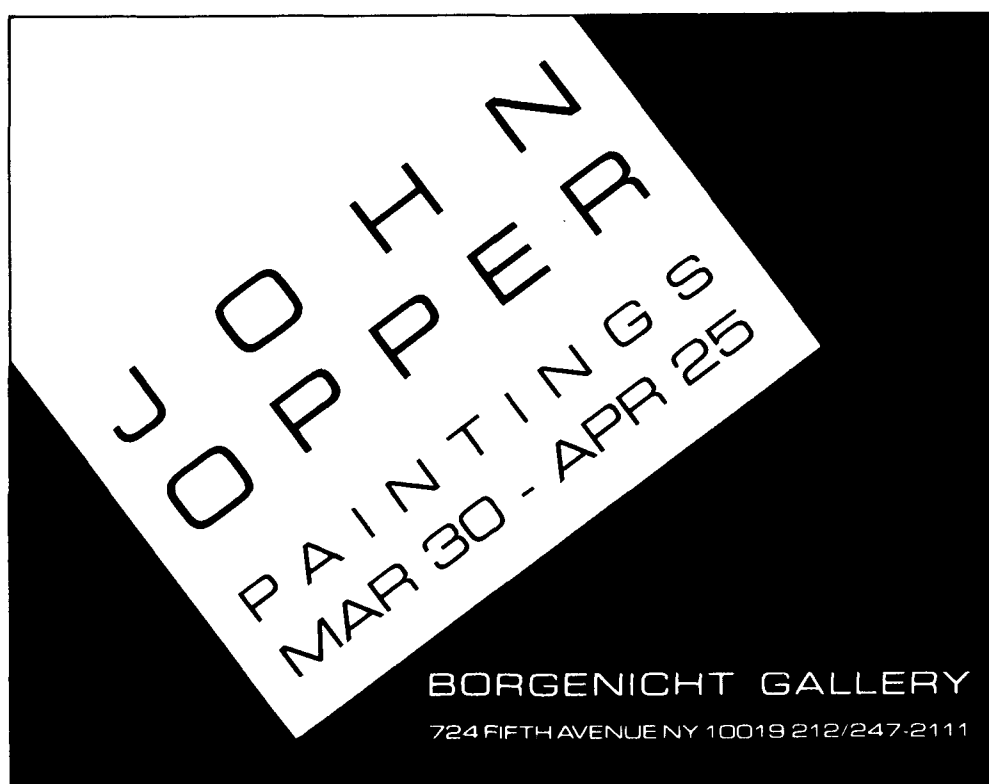
Sometimes passages from Bishop's prose even suggest specific poems. The journey through the remote Brazilian rain forest which is vividly recounted in "A Trip to Vigia," for instance, is reminiscent in tone and setting of Bishop's poem, "Questions of Travel." Here is a representative paragraph from "A Trip to Vigia":

The rains stopped and the sun came out.
 Certain varieties of glazed tropical leaves re-
 flected the light like nickel, or white enamel,
 but as the car passed they returned to their
 actual gray-green. It was confusing, and trying
 to the eyes. Palm trees, more pepper and jute,
 more bushes. Here and there a great jungle
 tree had been left standing, and black specks
 were busy high around the tops; each tree held
 a whole community of birds. At least two hun-
 dred feet high, a Brazil nut tree blossomed;
 one could tell only by a smell like that of a
 thousand lilacs.

And here is part of "Questions of Travel":

But surely it would have been a pity
 not to have seen the trees along this road,
 really exaggerated in their beauty,
 not to have seen them gesturing
 like noble pantomimists, robed in pink.
 —Not to have had to stop for gas and heard
 the sad, two-noted, wooden tune
 of disparate wooden clogs
 carelessly clacking over
 a grease-stained filling-station floor.
 (In another country the clogs would all be
 tested.
 Each pair there would have identical pitch.)
 —A pity not to have heard
 the other, less primitive music of the fat brown
 bird
 who sings above the broken gasoline pump
 in a bamboo church of Jesuit baroque:
 three towers, five silver crosses.

In both of these passages, Bishop is doing much the same thing. She is expressing her wonder at the abundant beauty of nature, and her fascination with the *differentness* of the sensations that one experiences in an



alien part of the world. Her reflections at the end of "Questions of Travel" are as relevant to her prose as to her poetry:

*"Is it lack of imagination that makes us come
to imagined places, not just stay at home?
Or could Pascal have been not entirely right
about just sitting quietly in one's room?"*

*Continent, city, country, society:
the choice is never wide and never free.
And here, or there . . . No. Should we have stayed
at home,
wherever that may be?"*

If the variety of places that the world contains is an important theme in Bishop's poetry (as is illustrated by the titles of some of her volumes of verse: *North & South*, *Geography III*, *Questions of Travel*), it is equally important in her prose. But in her prose, as in her poetry, Bishop is doing more than just seeing and describing the trees and flowers, oceans and rivers, houses and courtyards, butterflies and beetles that make a

given portion of the earth's surface unique. She is thinking about the act of seeing them. She is, in every line of her best work, subtly probing the nature of experience, the meaning of perception, the mystery of identity, the delicate, moment-to-moment wonder of existence, the endlessly confusing human confrontation with a concrete yet ambiguous and ever-changing reality. Bishop, in other words, is a relativist, and the question *Who am I?*, for her, always resolves into *Where am I?*

With Bishop, then, there are few firm conclusions, few abstract certainties to be gleaned from life in the material world. T. S. Eliot may well have written that "Mankind cannot bear too much reality," but Elizabeth Bishop, for one, was comfortable with reality; what she was unable to bear, it seems, was too much abstraction. In her prose as in her poetry she rejects the temptation to speak of the impalpable and intangible, to remove the reader from the physical by offering contrived and facile generalizations; she prefers, rather, to draw the tree, the bird,

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the person under inspection in careful, objective detail—every part, movement, and nuance sharply etched and accurately colored—and to let the result speak for itself. In her poem “Santarém,” about the place where two great Brazilian rivers meet, she repulses the temptation to make hard and fast interpretations:

That golden evening I really wanted to go no farther;
more than anything else I wanted to stay awhile
in that conflux of two great rivers, Tapajós,
Amazon,
grandly, silently flowing, flowing east.
Suddenly there'd been houses, people, and lots
of mongrel
riverboats skittering back and forth
under a sky of gorgeous, under-lit clouds,
with everything gilded, burnished along one
side,
and everything bright, cheerful, casual—or
so it looked.
I liked the place; I liked the idea of the place.
Two rivers. Hadn't two rivers sprung

from the Garden of Eden? No, that was four
and they'd diverged. Here only two
and coming together. Even if one were tempted
to literary interpretations
such as: life/death, right/wrong, male/female
—such notions would have resolved, dissolved,
straight off
in that watery, dazzling dialectic.

Similarly, Bishop refuses to end her long, detailed portrait of her friend and mentor Marianne Moore with the expected summing-up—a brief paragraph bringing all the physical details together in a single grand abstraction—and closes not with a comprehensive idea but with an omnibus image:

I find it impossible to draw conclusions or even to summarize. When I try to, I become foolishly bemused: I have a sort of subliminal glimpse of the capital letter *M* multiplying. I am turning the pages of an illuminated manuscript and seeing that initial letter again and again: Marianne's monogram; mother; manners; morals; and I catch myself murmur-

ing, "Manners and morals; manners *as* morals? Or is it morals *as* manners?" Since, like Alice, "in a dreamy sort of way," I can't answer either question, it doesn't much matter which way I put it; it *seems* to be making sense.

The bottom line, then, is that if Bishop is eternally uncertain about philosophy, she is at least certain of physiography. She finds the objective world fascinating and beautiful and comforting because it is, at least, unquestionably *there*. And her prose, like her poetry, represents, above all, an act of supreme reverence toward that world.

The second section of *The Collected Prose* is titled "Stories," and the narratives contained therein were all published in Bishop's lifetime. There are two early stories ("The Sea & Its Shore," "In Prison"), both of them—for Bishop—self-conscious, theme-heavy, and experimental in form. There are two affecting, though somewhat contrived, early stories ("The Baptism," "The Farmer's Children") about youngsters perishing in the icy Canadian winter (and after reading them one can better understand why Bishop spent much of her life in the tropics and subtropics). There are two tragically moving and uncontrived stories ("In the Village," "Gwendolyn") which seem to derive, in large part, from Bishop's childhood memories, and which one would be hard put to distinguish from her memoirs on internal evidence alone (indeed, in some "memoirs" she apparently gives her relatives made-up names, while using their real names in the "stories"). And there are two pensive, touching stories ("Memories of Uncle Neddy," "The Housekeeper") which also read like memoirs.

The pieces in the first section of the book, titled "Memories: People and Places"—most of them unpublished before Bishop's death in 1979 (although some have seen print since)—also may be divided into groups of two. There are two memoirs of Bishop's childhood in Nova Scotia and Massachusetts ("Primer Class," "The Country Mouse"), two witty recollections of people she met in New York in her youth ("The

U.S.A. School of Writing" and "Efforts of Affection: A Memoir of Marianne Moore"), two essays about Key West, written during her nine-year residency there ("Gregorio Valdes," "Mercedes Hospital"), and two pieces about Brazil, written during her more than two decades in that country ("To the Botequim and Back," "A Trip to Vigia").¹ The two childhood memoirs—both written in the early 1960s and never before published—are affecting and evocative. "Primer Class," a charming, gentle recollection of Bishop's kindergarten days in Canada, suggests that her romance with geography had already begun by the time she was five: "I was so taken with the pull-down maps that I wanted to snap them up, and pull them down again, and touch all the countries and provinces with my own hands." In "The Country Mouse," Bishop is a year or two older and more or less an orphan (her father was dead, her mother confined to a sanatorium); the memoir follows her to Worcester, Massachusetts—where she lived briefly with a set of rich grandparents whom she hardly knew—and then to Boston, where she was taken in by a poor aunt. This tale of a lonely and sensitive girl growing up in the bleaker latitudes, being shuffled from one strict, devout, not overly affectionate household to another, and finding herself one day in

1 The odd piece out is Bishop's introduction to *The Diary of "Helena Morley."* Helena Morley was the pseudonym of Senhora Augusto Mario Caldeira Brant, who kept the diary during her girlhood in the remote Brazilian mining town of Diamantina between 1893 and 1895. The diary was, apparently, all the rage in Brazilian literary circles in the late 1940s, and Bishop, who was impressed by its "authentic childlikeness, the classical sunlight and simplicity," elected to do the English translation, which was published in 1957. Bishop's introduction tells about her first acquaintance with the diary (and its by then aged author) in the early Fifties, and describes in great detail the village of Diamantina, which she took the trouble of visiting at about that time. It is difficult to be very interested in all of this, unfortunately, unless one has read the diary, which is of course not included in this book.

wealth and the next in poverty, is reminiscent of Mary McCarthy's own autobiographical volume, *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*. (The two women, incidentally, ended up at Vassar together.)

That the young Elizabeth had an acute identity problem was only to be expected. The United States, to her, was foreign territory. "I hated saluting the flag," Bishop writes in "The Country Mouse." "I didn't want to be an American. When I went home to lunch, I said so. Grandma was horrified; she almost wept." The memoir ends with an epiphany of identity, as it were. The young Elizabeth was sitting in a dentist's office with her Aunt Jenny and three other patients when suddenly

a feeling of absolute and utter desolation came over me. I felt . . . *myself*. In a few days it would be my seventh birthday. I felt *I, I, I*, and looked at the three strangers in panic. I was *one* of them too, inside my scabby body and wheezing lungs. "You're in for it now," something said. How had I got tricked into such a false position? I would be like that woman opposite who smiled at me so falsely every once in a while. The awful sensation passed, then it came back again. "You are you," something said. "How strange you are, inside looking out. You are not Beppo, or the chestnut tree, or Emma, you are *you* and you are going to be *you* forever." It was like coasting downhill, this thought, only much worse, and it quickly smashed into a tree. *Why* was I a human being?

The revelation that she would forever be herself, "inside looking out," may sound like a child's revelation, but it is a revelation which remained important to Bishop, and which no doubt helped to make her a writer obsessed with the concepts of identity and perspective, of self and other. (Significantly, Bishop also made the dentist's office episode the subject of a long, widely anthologized poem, "In the Waiting Room," written several years after "The Country Mouse.")

Identity and perspective are also key themes in "The U.S.A. School of Writing," which was probably written in 1966 and

was published for the first time in 1983. Although Bishop's memories of the school of the title—a correspondence school for writers at which she worked for several months after graduating from Vassar in 1934—are both funny and pathetic, the piece is, at its most diverting level, Bishop's own version of the Nabokovian name game. What interests Bishop the most here is the seeming slipperiness of selfhood at the U.S.A. School. Bishop, to begin with, was known to her correspondents as Fred G. Margolies; this, she explains, "had been the name, not of my predecessor, but of the one before the one before that. It developed that some of Mr. Margolies's students were still taking the course and had to receive their corrected lessons signed by him, and I would have to be Mr. Margolies until they graduated. Then I could turn into myself again . . ." Bishop's officemate, a woman named Rachel, also operated under an alias: she was Mr. Hearn to her students. And one of Bishop's correspondents "revealed that her aged mother approved of her learning to write to such an extent that she had given her the forty dollars and '*her own name*' to write under." The daughter's name was Emma, the mother's was Katerina. Would I please address her as Katerina in the future?" All her correspondence students, in fact, according to Bishop, had identity problems:

Henry James once said that he who would aspire to be a writer must inscribe on his banner the one word "Loneliness." In the case of my students, their need was not to ward off society, but to get into it. Their problem was that on their banners "Loneliness" had been inscribed despite them, and so they aspired to be writers. Without exception the letters I received were from people suffering from terrible loneliness in all its better-known forms, and in some I had never even dreamed of. Writing, especially writing to Mr. Margolies, was a way of being less alone. To be printed, and to be "famous," would be an instant shortcut to identity, and an escape from solitude, because then other people would know one as admirers, friends, lovers, suitors, etc.

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The New Criterion *April* 1984

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Reading this odd, witty memoir strengthens one's already clear conviction that Bishop—the lonely child confused about her identity and nationality, the self-exiled adult who wrote of “home,/ wherever that may be”—herself became a writer in order to bring her sense of identity into sharper focus.

Perhaps the most entertaining piece in the book is “Efforts of Affection: A Memoir of Marianne Moore,” written between 1969 and 1979 and first published in 1983. It is an episodic memoir, touching and humorous by turns, which paints a picture of an obstinately moralistic (recall the “slight censorious frown” described in Bishop’s poem, “Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore”) and old-fashioned, but good-hearted and unpretentious woman to whom being a “lady” or a “gentleman” was more important than being a great poet. One senses Bishop’s sympathy with this attitude, which was, to say the least, not overly popular among the American poets of her generation. To such poets as Delmore Schwartz, Robert Lowell, and John Berryman the rights of self-declared poetic genius often seemed to outweigh any responsibility to a code of manners or ethics. Poetry was, to these men, the beginning and the end, the Alpha and Omega. To Bishop and Moore there were without question “things that are important beyond all this

fiddle.” The distinction between the values of these three men, on the one hand, and these two women, on the other, is best illustrated by Bishop’s reaction to Lowell’s *The Dolphin*, in which he quoted sensitive passages from his estranged wife Elizabeth Hardwick’s personal letters. After reading the manuscript of the book, which Lowell had sent her, Bishop responded with a long letter, reproduced in Ian Hamilton’s biography of Lowell, suggesting that he not publish the book—which she admitted to be “great”—because the quotations from Hardwick’s private correspondence were cruel intrusions of privacy and violations of trust which would hurt Hardwick’s feelings deeply; “art,” Bishop wrote memorably, “*just isn’t worth that much.*” Lowell, of course, no more able to see things her way than a cat is able to see in color, went ahead with publication.

Ironically, it is perhaps her refusal to place art above all else that makes Bishop’s art—whether prose or poetry—so magnificent. For it is an art which approaches the world with civility and respect, with patient regard and quiet control. It is an art which is distinguished by the fact that it knows its place, which is not out to shake things up but, with the utmost care and delicacy, to discern and depict things as they are, if only for a moment in time.

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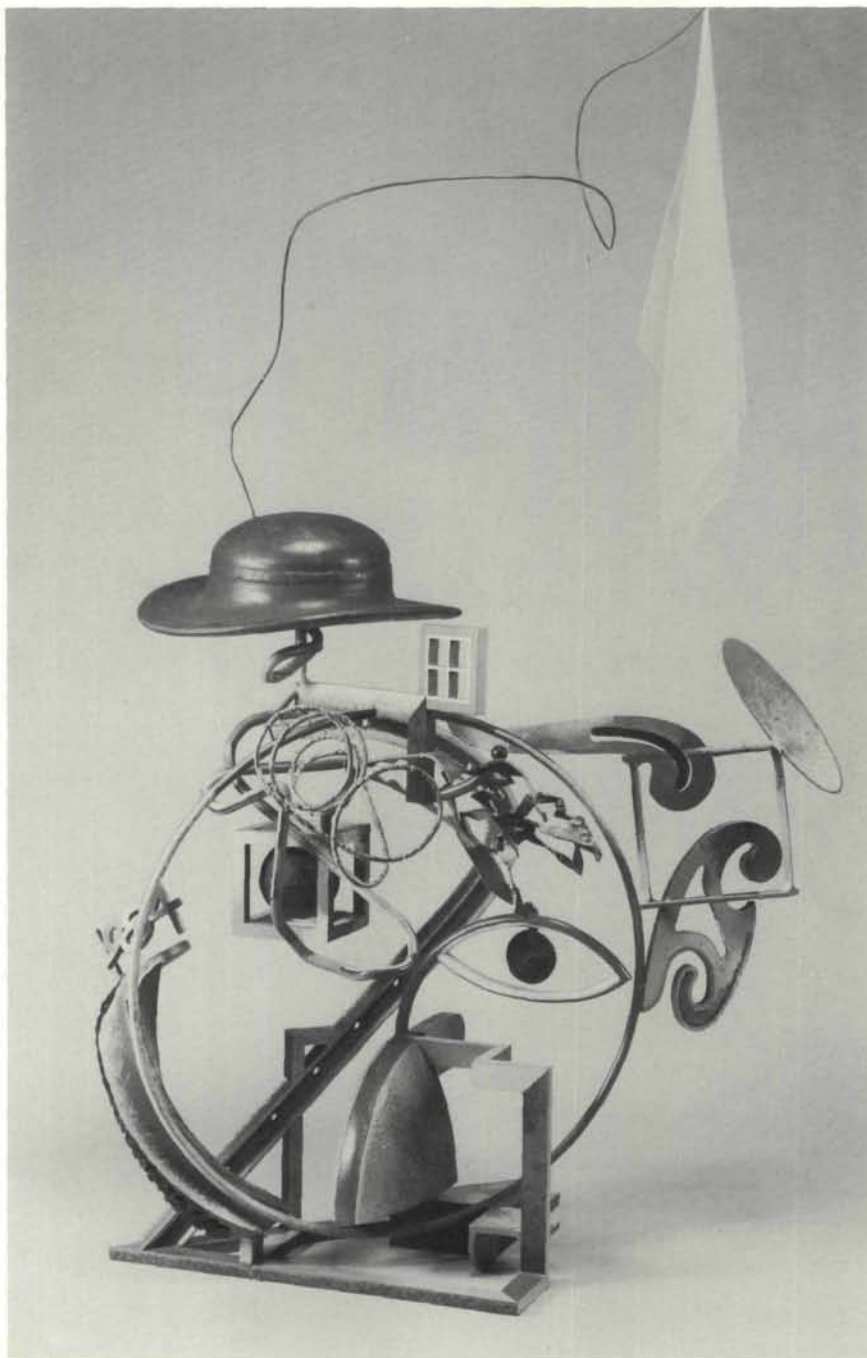
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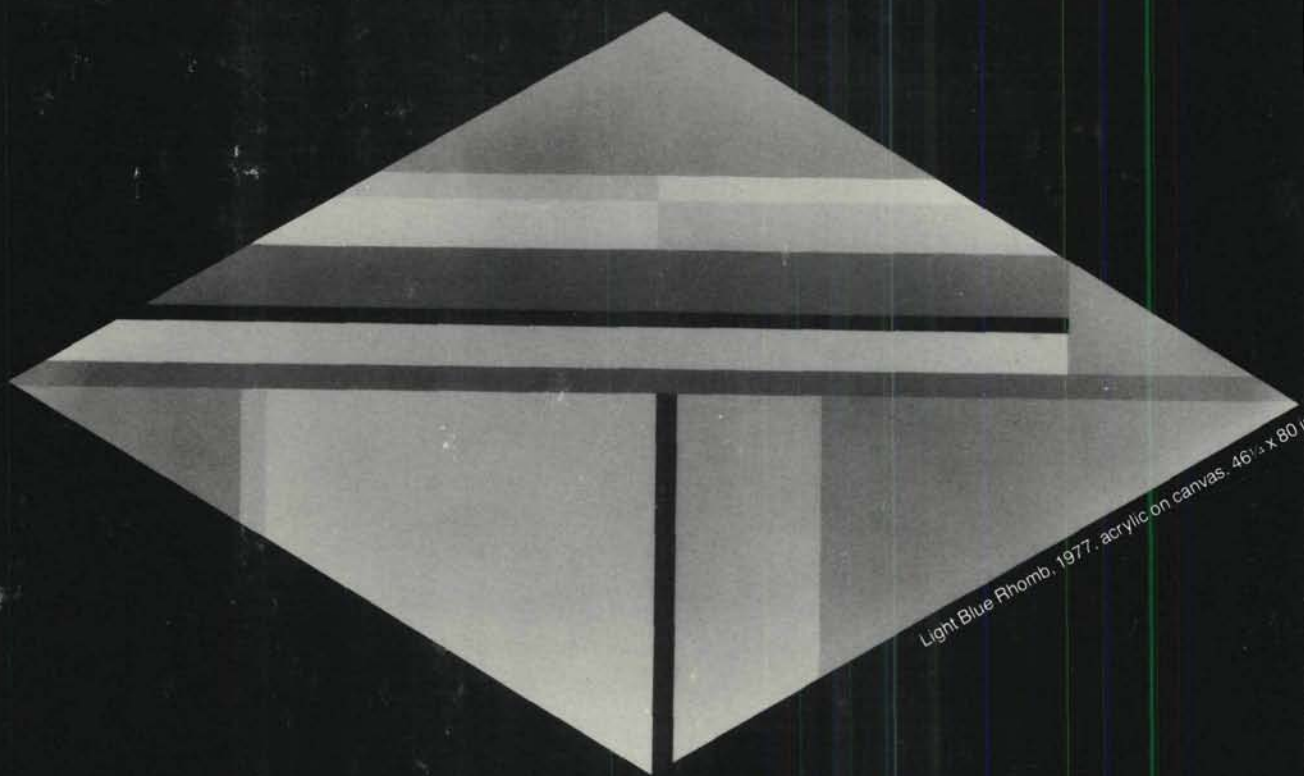


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